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Волоколамское ШОССЕ

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If it befalleth a man to witness a thing of great note as, perchance, the eruption of a mountain vomiting fire, which destroyeth a flourishing settlement, or the uprising of an oppressed people against their lord, or the invasion of his own native country by an unknown and savage people, all that he seeth he should set down on paper. Nay, if he be not himself well skilled in the art of writing down the words of a history or in the use of a quill, then should he recount what he hath seen to an experienced scribe, that the other may set down what he saith on paper, for the lasting edification of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

V. Yan, *Genghis Khan*

Part One

THE MAN WITHOUT A SURNAME

1

In this book I am merely the faihful and conscientious scribe. Here is the story of the book.

2

"No, I won't tell you anything," Baurjan Momysh-Uly said sharply. "I can't stand people who write about the war from hearsay."

"Why not?"

He answered my question with another, "Do you know what love is?"

"Yes, I do."

"Before the war I too thought I knew. I loved a woman, loved her passionately, but this is nothing compared to love born in battle. In war, on the battlefield, the intensest love is born, and also the intensest hate. Both are inconceivable to those who have not felt them. And do you realize what is meant by an inner conflict, what is meant by conscience?"

"I do," I asserted, though now I was less certain of myself.

"Oh no, you don't. You don't know how the two emotions, fear and duty, fight and struggle against each other. The most vicious beasts do not fight more savagely than those two emotions. Perhaps you know what the conscience of a worker is, or of a husband, but you don't know what a soldier's conscience is. Have you ever flung a grenade into an enemy dug-out?"

"No. . . ."

"Then how are you going to write about conscience? The soldier goes into attack with his company, he comes under machine-gun fire, his comrades fall at his side, but he crawls on and on. An hour goes by—sixty minutes. There are sixty seconds in each minute, and in any of these seconds he could be killed. But he crawls on. That is the soldier's conscience! And his joy! Do you know what joy is?"

"Apparently, I don't know what that is, either," I answered.

"You're right. You know the joy of love and, perhaps, the joy of creating. Very likely your wife has shared with you the joys of motherhood. But he who has not felt the joy of victory over the enemy, the joy of great deeds in battle—he does not know what real joy is, the keenest, all-consuming joy. How will you write about that? Make it up?"

On the table lay a magazine in which there was a story about the men of Panfilov's Division, about the very regiment of the division that Baurjan Momysh-Uly commanded.

He pushed the magazine brusquely towards the lamp—all his movements were brusque, even when he threw away a match after lighting a cigarette—ran his eyes over the pages, bent over one of them where the magazine stayed, opened and then threw it down.

"I can't read it," he muttered. "During the war I read a book written not in ink or pencil but in blood! After that book I simply can't stand your compilations! What have you got to write about?"

I tried to defend my position, but Baurjan Momysh-Uly was inexorable.

"No," he said, sharply. "You wouldn't be writing the truth and I hate lies."

3

This is how we first met.

For a long time I had been looking for someone who would be able to tell me about the battle of Moscow—someone whose story would reveal the meaning and aim of the operation and, at the same time, carry me to where everything is put into the crucible and tested—into the battle itself.

I will not describe my search in full, but merely tell you the essential facts.

From materials I studied, I learned that during the enemy's offensive on Moscow in October and November 1941, when he tried to grip the capital with a pincer movement, he also made a direct drive on his objective, delivering his main thrust along the Volokolamsk and later the Leningrad Highway.

During those grim October days, when the Germans had broken through at Vyazma and were moving on Moscow with tanks, motor cycles and lorries, the approaches to the Volokolamsk Highway were covered by the 316th Rifle Division, now known as the General Panfilov 8th Guards Division. In the course of a second, November, offensive against Moscow, the enemy attempted to drive a wedge in the same direction and was again met by the Panfilov Division. In a seven-day battle near Kryukovo, some twenty miles from Moscow, the Division, with other Red Army units, brought the Germans to a halt and drove them back.

I set out to meet these Panfilov men, not knowing, as yet, the name or rank of the person who was destined to tell me the story of that epic two-months' engagement, but firmly convinced that I would meet him.

And meet him I did.

It was Baurjan Momysh-Uly, Senior Lieutenant during the battle of Moscow, and now, two years later, Colonel of the Guards.

4

When he introduced himself I did not quite catch his name and asked him to say it again.

"Baurjan Momysh-Uly"—he repeated articulating every syllable distinctly.

There was a peculiar note in his voice which at the moment seemed to me an expression of irritation. He apparently likes to be understood instantly, I thought.

Through force of habit I took out my pad and pencil.

"Pardon me, but how do you spell your surname?"

"I have no surname," he replied.

I was amazed. He explained that, translated, Momysh-Uly meant "son of Momysh."

"So that's my patronymic," he continued. "Baurjan is my given name but I have no surname."

There was no trace in his features of the soft dreaminess sometimes supposed to be characteristic of the East. There are plenty of faces which look as though they were sculptured, sometimes lovingly and carefully, at other times roughly, in a slipshod way. But Baurjan Momysh-Uly's face might have been fashioned out of bronze or fumed oak with some sharp instrument which did not leave a single soft, rounded line.

It brought back an impression of my childhood. On the hard, blue cover of a novel by Mayne Reid—or was it Fenimore Cooper?—there was the profile in relief of a gaunt Indian face. And it seemed to me that Baurjan's profile bore a remarkable resemblance to it.

Mongolian in colouring, with rather prominent cheekbones, often impenetrably calm, especially in moments of anger, his face was lit up by his unusually large black eyes. His shining black hair that stubbornly defied the comb, Baurjan jokingly called horse hair.

I looked at him as I listened. This Kazakh spoke perfect Russian. Even when greatly excited he did not mispronounce his words or confuse his expressions. Only a certain slowness in speech seemed sometimes to be deliberate; I noticed that when he spoke in the Kazakh language the words came more quickly.

After selecting a cigarette and closing his cigarette case with a sharp snap, he concluded obstinately:

"If, after all, you should write about me some time, call me by my Kazakh name: Baurjan Momysh-Uly. And tell your readers: he is a Kazakh, a shepherd who used to tend the flocks on the steppe, a man without a surname."

5

On the very first evening of our acquaintance I had the good fortune to hear Baurjan Momysh-Uly talk to some new officers who had just joined the regiment and who were at the front for the first time.

He spoke about the soul of the soldier. Developing his ideas slowly, he described one of the actions which had taken place on the Volokolamsk Highway.

My heart beat wildly. I quickly took out my notebook and eagerly began to write. Still scarcely able to credit my good luck, I was already building castles in the air. At last they were in sight—the pages of that long-awaited tale.

Seizing an opportunity after his talk, I asked Baurjan Momysh-Uly to tell me the story of the Volokolamsk Highway from beginning to end.

"No," he said; "I shall tell you precisely nothing."

The reader knows the rest of our conversation.

6

I had no doubt that Baurjan Momysh-Uly was being unfair to me. I was after the same thing as he was—the truth. His judgement of people, especially of those who had not shared the lot of the soldier, was often far too sharp. I think this was partly due to Baurjan's youth—he had just turned thirty at the time we met.

After this curt refusal I did not press the point, but spent quite a few days in Baurjan's company.

He liked to talk and was a born story-teller. I took advantage of opportune moments and patiently jotted everything down. After a time he became accustomed to me.

From Baurjan's friends I learned the story of his life. He had been given two nicknames at school: "Big-Eyes" and "Shan-Timess." The latter means literally: "inaccessible to the dust," and was the name of a legendary horse which galloped so swiftly that even the dust raised by his hoofs did not touch him.

Then the moment came when I said to Baurjan:

"I'm going to write about you after all. And somewhere I'll be sure to mention that at school they used to call you 'Shan-Timess.' "

He smiled, and the smile transfigured him. His stern face suddenly assumed the softness of a child's.

"And you're an artillery horse," he said affectionately. "Don't take offence, it's meant as a compliment. An artillery horse carries you slowly and it's difficult to turn him round, but when he does turn, he pulls the guns along with him. Well, you seem to have turned me round.... I'll tell you everything you want to know. But on one condition...."

He leaned slightly back and took his sword out of its scabbard. In the low, damp dug-out dimly lit by an oil lamp with no glass, the damascened blade gleamed brightly.

"My condition is that you undertake to write only the truth," he continued. "When the book is ready you will bring it to me. I'll read the first chapter and I'll say: 'No good, lies! Put your left hand on the table!' Swish—and your left hand is gone! I'll read the second chapter: 'No good! Lies! Put your right hand on the table!' Swish—and your right hand's gone! How do you like that?"

"All right," I answered, "I'm willing."

We were both joking but did not smile.

His wide eyes, so unlike the general run of Mongol eyes, were piercing me through and through.

"Good," he said. "Get out your paper, take your pencil. Write: Chapter I. Fear."

FEAR

1

"Write: Chapter I. Fear," Baurjan Momysh-Uly repeated.

Then, after a moment's thought, he began:

"General Panfilov's men rushed into their first battle without the least feeling of fear.... Well, what do you think of that for a beginning?"

"I don't know," I replied hesitatingly.

"That's the way corporals of literature write," he said in a hard voice. "While you have been living here I have purposely given orders to have you taken to places where an occasional shell comes over or an odd bullet zips by every now and then. I wanted you to experience the sensation of fear. You needn't confirm it, I know, without your admitting it, that you had to suppress your fear.

"So why do you and your brother yarn-spinners imagine that the men at the front are supernatural, and not like you yourself? Why do you suppose the soldier hasn't got human feelings like you? Is he of a lower order? Or perhaps he's a creature of a higher order?

"Maybe, according to your way of looking at it, heroism is a gift of nature? Or perhaps you think the Quartermaster-Sergeant issues fearlessness with the rations and marks off who has received his portion and who hasn't?

"I've seen a lot of fighting since the war began and am now a regimental commander and I think I've had experience to say: that's not so!

"What were the Germans reckoning on when they invaded a country so vast as ours? They were certain that on their march East, General Fear would march at the head of their tank columns, and that every living thing would cringe down or flee before him.

"We saw our first fighting on the night of October 15, 1941—it was also a battle against fear. And seven weeks later, when we repulsed the Germans from Moscow, General Fear ran away with them. They learned at last—perhaps for the first time in this war—what it meant to have fear driving them from behind."

2

We did not go into action until the middle of October, when fighting flared up all along the Moscow front. After leaving Kazakhstan we had spent a month and a half in the marshes of Leningrad Region, some twenty or twenty-five miles from the front, on what was known as the second line of defence and we were kept in the G.H.Q. reserve.

On the morning of October 6 I received orders to fall my battalion in and march to the nearest railway siding. A train made up of trucks and gondolas was waiting for us there and during the night we started off on our journey.

Where were we going? Even I, commander of the battalion, was not supposed to know this until the proper time. It seemed that we were moving not towards the front but away from it. The train was heading for Bologoye junction, not stopping at any of the intervening stations.

En route we were told that dinner would be waiting for us in Bologoye. But someone kept hurrying us on, someone kept driving our train on. There was not even time to issue dinner. It took only two or three minutes to change the engine, it whistled—and we were off again!

Everyone was curious to know where we would go from Bologoye. We soon found out—towards Moscow.

Without even slowing down at small country stations, the trains bearing the 316th Rifle Division tore ahead at full speed with intervals of an hour and a half or two hours between them.

Why were we being transferred? For what purpose? We did not know.

Why were we rushing on at such a speed? Where would we go after passing through Moscow? Where would we stop?

No one knew—no one knew....

The unusual speed with which we moved roused a feeling of restless excitement in us all. Everyone thought that at last—this was the real thing; at last we were going into action, into battle.

3

On October 7 we detrained in the forest near Volokolamsk, eighty miles to the west of Moscow.

I was summoned to the Regimental Commander at the station.

I remember the squat, rivetted iron towers near the railway camouflaged in some green and grey design. They were oil and petrol tanks.

Could I have guessed that soon, against the background of a grim October sky, without the roar of the explosion that followed after, without the flames and smoke that were to darken the horizon the next instant, I would see them, these very same iron towers, slowly rise skyward, one after another, hang as if suspended in the air for a moment, and come crashing down?

As I approached the station building—later nothing remained but a gutted brick shell with streaks of smoke over the empty windows—I saw in the distance a long train of gondolas compactly loaded with guns.

Someone hailed me. I went over to the train and there I saw Colonel Malinin, commander of the artillery regiment of our division.

"Feast your eyes on that, renegade," he said. "Like it?" He had called me a renegade ever since the day when he learned that I, an artilleryman, and commander of a battery, had been transferred to the infantry at my own request.

The guns had been greased at the plant with a heavy coating of thick gun fat which had darkened on the surface. They had just arrived here, to supplement our divisional artillery.

"O-ho," I said. "And there are heavy guns too."

"We're going to set up these big fellows like fortresses."

"Why, are we likely to be here so long?"

"We're here for the winter apparently."

I was disappointed. That meant that we were again in the rear, in reserve.

I did not know that, way ahead of us beyond Vyazma, the Germans had cut through the line guarding Moscow, and that four days before this Hitler had broadcast to the world: "The Red Army has been destroyed; the road to Moscow is open."

Moscow itself was at that time working feverishly, creating a new defence belt 80 to 100 miles from the city boundary which has gone down in history as the "distant approaches to Moscow." Battalions of Communists in civilian dress pulled out of the Moscow railway stations one after another, without any speeches or brass bands. They received arms and uniforms on the way. Two to three days before our arrival an infantry officers' school had been rushed on lorries through Volokolamsk to the Moscow Sea.* They were followed by the Moscow Red Banner artillery school with their guns. Moscow—and I use this word symbolically, implying by it the headquarters of the Supreme Command, the Kremlin, the country—Moscow was sending ever fresh streams of men and arms to meet the enemy. These guns were a part of that material.

At Regimental Headquarters they confirmed that the Division had been ordered to take over the Volokolamsk District and fortify it. I was shown my battalion's sector.

4

In the evening we set out on a night march towards the river Rusa, twenty miles from Volokolamsk.

A native of Southern Kazakhstan, I was accustomed to a late winter; but here, outside Moscow, at the begin-

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A native of Southern Kazakhstan, I was accustomed to a late winter; but here, outside Moscow, at the beginning of October, there were frosts in the morning. At dawn, after moving along a dirt-road that had been churned up by countless wheels and then frozen hard, we arrived at the village of Novlyanskoye, the largest in our sector.

---

* Name of a large reservoir on the Moscow-Volga Canal.—*Tr.*

I immediately noticed the outline of a low belfry, dark against the cloudy sky.

I left my battalion in a wood not far from the village and went off with the company commanders to reconnoitre the locality.

Five miles of the bank of the narrow, winding Rusa were assigned to my battalion. According to regulations, such a sector would be considered large even for a regiment. However, that did not worry me. I felt sure that if the enemy ever did reach this spot, he would be met on our five-mile stretch not by one battalion, but by five or ten. And it was on this basis that I thought we should plan our defences.

Don't expect me to give you any picturesque descriptions of nature. I can't say whether the landscape was beautiful or not.

As they say in topography, the dark surface of the narrow, sluggish Rusa was covered with large leaves, which seemed almost artificial, but which, during the summer, must have supported white lilies. Perhaps it was all very beautiful, but, looking at it, I mentally noted that this miserable little stream was shallow and easy for the enemy to cross.

However, the bank on our side had been made impassable for tanks: there was a sheer drop to the water, called, in army jargon, an "escarpment." The bank gleamed with freshly cut clay that still bore the marks of shovels.

Beyond the river you could see far into the distance—open fields and dense woods or large patches of forest. In one place, at a slight angle to the village of Novlyanskoye, the forest on the opposite bank came almost down to the water's edge. Here there was probably everything an artist could wish for to paint a typical Russian autumn forest, but for me that strip of forest was an object of hatred. More likely than not, the enemy would screen himself there from our fire and mass his forces for an attack.

The devil take those pines and firs! They'll have to be cut down. The forest must be cleared back from the river!

Although none of us, as I've already told you, expected any real fighting here in the near future, we were faced with the task of building a defence zone and this job had to be done conscientiously, as befits officers and soldiers of the Red Army.

5

The first heralds of the retreat of our troops reached us the next day. Refugees straggled past, having left everything behind them. Among them were some Red Army men who had broken through the German encirclement in small groups.

I came across these vagabonds in soldiers' uniforms, at the battalion cook-house.

They were warming themselves by the fire and elderly Lieutenant Ponomaryov, commander of the quartermaster's platoon who had managed a rather small construction job before the war, was looking at them curiously. The cooks and the day's kitchen fatigue party were also there.

Ponomaryov called them to attention and hurried to report to me.

I gave a side glance at the men sitting round the fire, some of them got up, others made only a half-hearted motion to do so.

"Who are these men?" I asked.

A short soldier with a pock-marked face stepped out, away from the fire.

"We've broken out of encirclement, Comrade Senior Lieutenant!"

Encirclement.... I heard that word for the first time that morning.

"What encirclement? Where?"

"Near Vyazma, Comrade Senior Lieutenant.... He's pushing on to here, now...."

"Who is?"

"Jerry, of course, who else?"

"Have you seen the Germans?"

"Has anybody seen them? They sprinkle mortar bombs on you like peas.... Or they drive down the roads in tanks firing in all directions."

"Did you see the tanks?"

"You can look at tanks sitting in the pictures, Comrade Senior Lieutenant.... Out there you don't feel much like looking! Everything goes dim and you can't even see the light when Jerry starts shooting and throwing his stuff about."

"Where is your rifle?"

"I have it, it isn't damaged.... I'm sorry, Comrade Senior Lieutenant, it isn't cleaned...."

"Where are you off to?"

"To Moscow where we're re-forming.... We've been moving fast, we passed plenty of others on the way. I took charge of them, Comrade Senior Lieutenant, to get them away.... They say we'll stand and give battle in Moscow. We'll go right on.... It's no use hanging about here, Jerry'll be here soon.... Can we get a bite from your cook-house, Comrade Senior Lieutenant?"

The naïvete with which the little pock-marked soldier admitted running-away was especially terrifying. He was the centre of attention.

I took another look at his "unit." None of them had washed or shaved for a long time and that gave their faces the same grey hue. Mud that they did not trouble to wipe off their boots and puttees dried on as they sat by the fire. None of them had badges of rank on their greatcoats.

"Are you all privates?" I asked.

There was an awkward pause. Then one of them stood up. He was a youngster of about twenty-two with sad, vacant eyes.

"I'm a lieutenant, platoon commander," he said.

I don't know whether my face changed or not but inwardly I flinched as though from a blow: how could a platoon commander, a lieutenant, an officer of the Red Army, flee from the front under the leadership of an old soldier?

At that moment the cook put a dixie full of piping hot soup in front of the escapees.

"Eat that," he said, "you'll be all right now, you're back in your own army.... That'll do you good!"

I shouted:

"Stand up! Lieutenant Ponomaryov! Arrest the deserters, take away their weapons!"

"I won't give you my rifle," said the pock-marked soldier.

"Silence! Lieutenant Ponomaryov, do as you're ordered.

Even before I had finished speaking I noticed, that Ponomaryov was looking past me at something farther away and that he had raised his brows in astonishment.

I looked round. About a dozen men in army greatcoats, some with rifles and some without, were straggling wearily towards the battalion cook-house. Some of them had their collars up and their hands in their pockets. Such things did not happen in my battalion, obviously they were not my men.

They came up to us.

"Who are these men?" I asked.

"We've broken out of encirclement, Comrade Senior Lieutenant."

6

That day, as usual, I made a tour of battalion defences.

It was a cold, windy day. Snow was falling, thin and penetrating, to freeze in icy grains on the grass and accumulate in small white ridges on the hardened clods of ploughed earth. It was dinner-time. The men were eating in quiet nooks behind mounds of excavated clay, or in open, half-dug trenches.

Passing down the line of shovels stuck into the ground, I overheard the following:

"No, boys, he won't strike from where you expect him.... That's not his way, to go where he's expected...."

Spoons clattered. Some of the men were eating in a sand-pit, behind a small embankment.

"Well, what way does he like, then?"

I recognized the man's nationality by his accent—it was a Kazakh who had asked that question.

"He'll go round you, that's all.... Then you'll find out all what he likes...."

"And then what?" this from the Kazakh again.

Whose trench was that? Who was the Kazakh there? A name sprang to mind—Barambayev. That's right, his machine-gun crew was there. Or was it Galliulin?... They were both in the same crew.

"Then—don't give up," a new voice chimed in. "It's all over with you if you get into his hands."

"We could hide in the forest. He's afraid of the forest."

Again the spoons clattered quietly. Some soldiers who had broken out of encirclement were having dinner with my men here. Another unfamiliar voice broke the silence.

"And my haversack was there, and my mess tin.... We were sitting and eating, something like now, when all of a sudden...."

"...all of a sudden you ran away, you scoundrels," I felt like breaking into the conversation, but one thing stopped me: not far away I saw the shining blue-steel barrel of a machine-gun carefully concealed by a pile of turf. A machine-gunner was on duty there. The cartridge belt was in the gun.

"Everything in order?" I asked.

"All you have to do is press the button, Comrade Battalion Commander."

I sat down and, aiming at the surface of the water, pressed the button. The gun kicked and began to work. The battalion had been busy digging trenches, and had not as yet done any shooting here—this was the first firing to be heard in our sector of the line.

Someone jumped out of the pit.

"Alarm!" I shouted. "Stand by!"

And immediately I heard, like a distorted echo of what I had said:

"Germans!"

The voice was strangely muffled; the man did not cry out, but rather breathed the word as if the Germans were already on top of us.

The next moment someone started running. Others followed him. I did not get a chance to see how it happened. It all took place in a flash.

The forest was not far cff, about one hundred and fifty to two hundred paces away. They ran in that direction.

I climbed up on a mound of clay and stood there, silent, looking after them. I heard a shout close by.

"Halt."

A string of profanity followed.

The shouter was machine-gunner Blokha who appeared suddenly from somewhere. Seeing me he rushed towards me, towards the machine-gun. A feeling of poignant love shot right through me. I have never loved a woman as I did Blokha at that moment when he came running towards me.

The first to stop was Galliulin, a tremendous Kazakh a packer by profession. He could carry his machine-gun and tripod easily on his broad shoulders. He hung his head and pressed his hand to his breast, mutely begging forgiveness while his legs were already carrying him towards me, close on Blokha's heels.

The next to look back was Murin, a fellow who wore glasses and who, before the war, had been doing post-graduate work at the Moscow Conservatory and writing articles on the history of music. But someone nudged him and pointed to the near-by forest and he again raced on, like a hare. Then he turned round once more and stopped. His sweaty face kept twisting on its scraggy neck first towards me, then towards the forest. Finally he wiped his glasses hurriedly with his fingers and ran back towards me. Murin was the second to return.

They were all from the same section, the same machine-gun crew.... The only one missing now was their commander, Sergeant Barambayev.

It had often given me a great deal of pleasure to watch how skilfully Barambayev, a Kazakh like myself, stripped and assembled a machine-gun, how quickly he guessed, like a born mechanic, the cause of stoppages. "We Kazakhs are also becoming mechanically minded, like the Russians," I sometimes thought when I saw Barambayev.

But now he must have slipped quietly past, afraid to look me in the face....

I met the men in silence as they returned. I knew that my fighters were honest men. They were now racked with shame.... How could I prevent them from falling victim to that excruciating feeling a second time, how save them from disgrace? How could I be sure that they would not run away again and then, afterwards, would not be able to understand how it had happened? What should I do with them?

Encourage them? Talk with them? Yell at them? Have them arrested?

Tell me, what should I have done?

"JUDGE ME"

1

I was sitting in my dug-out, staring at the floor, my drooping head resting on my arms, like this (here Baurjan Momysh-Uly showed me how he had sat), and was completely engrossed in my thoughts.

"May I come in, Comrade Battalion Commader?. . ."

I nodded but did not lift my head.

Jalmuhamed Boszhanov, political officer of a machine-gun company, came in.

"*Aksakal,*" he said softly in Kazakh.

Literally translated, *aksakal* means "grey-beard," which is our name for the oldest in the clan, the father. Boszhanov sometimes called me that.

I looked up at him. His round, good-natured face was deeply troubled.

"*Aksakal*. . . . Something extraordinary has happened in the company. Sergeant Barambayev has shot himself through the hand."

"Barambayev?"

"Yes. . . ."

Something seemed to clutch at my heart. Everything hurt all at once: chest, neck, stomach. Barambayev was a Kazakh, like me, a Kazakh with capable hands, commander of a machine-gun section—and the very man who had not come back to me.

"What did you do with him? Kill him?"

"No. . . . I bandaged him up and—"

"And what?"

"Arrested him and brought him to you. . . ."

"Where is he? Bring him in!"

And so. . . . The first traitor, the first man to inflict a wound on himself, had appeared in my battalion. And of all people . . . Barambayev!. . .

He came in slowly. . . . At first I could scarcely recognize him. His face was ashen and flabby, lifeless, like a mask. You see such faces among insane people. He held his bandaged left arm crooked as if in a sling. The blood had oozed through the lint. His right hand twitched. As he caught my glance he could not pluck up courage enough to salute. His arm dropped; he was afraid.

"Well?" I said grimly.

"I really don't know how it happened myself, Comrade Battalion Commander. It was an accident. I really don't know how it happened myself."

He kept muttering this sentence stubbornly.

"Well?"

Although he must have expected me to swear at him, I did not do so. There are times when there is no sense in swearing. Barambayev went on to explain that as he was running into the forest he stumbled, fell, and the rifle went off.

"That's not true!" I exclaimed. "You're a coward. A traitor. Our country roots out men like you."

I looked at my watch. It was almost three.

"Lieutenant Rakhimov!"

Rakhimov was Chief of Staff of the battalion. He stood up.

"Lieutenant Rakhimov. Tell Private Blokha to report here at once."

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"In an hour and a quarter, at 16.00 hours, the battalion will fall in on the glade at the edge of the forest here.... That is all. You may go," I ordered.

"What are you going to do with me? What are you going to do with me?" Barambayev began hurriedly, as if afraid he would not be able to get it all out.

"Have you shot in front of the battalion!"

Suddenly Barambayev fell down on his knees.

His hands, both the unharmed and the bandaged one, stained with the blood of shame, were stretched out towards me.

"Comrade Battalion Commander.... I'll tell you the truth.... Comrade Battalion Commander.... I did it myself.... I did it intentionally...."

"Get up!" I said. "At least try and die without grovelling like a worm."

"Forgive...."

"Get up!"

He got up.

"Ah, Barambayev, Barambayev!" Boszhanov said softly. "Tell me, what were you thinking of?"

For an instant it seemed to me that I myself had said it, as if the words I had been trying to suppress had burst from my lips in spite of everything.

"I didn't think," Barambayev muttered. "I didn't think. I don't know how it happened myself."

He again grasped at that phrase like a drowning man at a straw.

"Don't lie, Barambayev," Boszhanov said. "Tell the Battalion Commander the truth."

"That is the truth, that is the truth.... But when I saw the blood, I came to my senses—why had I done it? The devil tempted me.... Don't shoot me, forgive me, Comrade Battalion Commander."

Maybe he actually did tell the truth at that moment.

Maybe it actually did happen as he said, a momentary mental aberration, a momentary catastrophe of a soul undermined with fear.

But that is just how men flee from the scene of action, that is how they become traitors to their country—and are often unable to grasp later how it all happened.

I said to Boszhanov:

"Blokha will take his place as commander of the section. And his own section, the people with whom he lived and from whom he fled, will carry out the sentence. . . ."

Boszhanov bent towards me and said in a whisper:

"*Aksakal*, have we the right?"

"Yes!" I replied. "Later, I will answer to whomsoever I may have to, but in an hour from now I'll do as I have said. And you prepare the report."

Private Blokha, his breath coming in short, quick gasps and his eyebrows working in his excitement, came into the dug-out and somewhat awkwardly reported.

"Do you know why I've sent for you?" I asked.

"No, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Look at that man. . . . Do you recognize him?"

I pointed to Barambayev.

"What the . . ." Blokha began. Contempt and pity were mingled in his voice. "Well, you look a real scarecrow, I must say."

"You will shoot him," I said to Blokha. "You and your section. . . ."

Blokha turned pale. Then with a deep sigh he replied:

"Very good, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"I appoint you section commander. See that your men are up to the mark. Political Officer Boszhanov will help you!"

Going over to Barambayev, I tore off his chevrons and Red Army star.

He stood there, his arms limp, his face immobile and grey.

2

At the appointed time, at 16.00, I went out to the battalion drawn up on three sides of a square. In the centre of the open side, the object of everyone's gaze, stood Barambayev, wearing his long army coat, but without his belt. He was facing the men.

"Battalion, atten-tion!" commanded Rakhimov.

A peculiar noise resounded through the silence and ceased sharply, a sound which the commander's ear never fails to catch—the rifles moved and stopped as if there had been only one.

For an instant there was a spark of joy in my oppressed soul. No, this was no mere uniformed mob—they were soldiers, a force, a battalion.

"The battalion is fallen in as ordered," Rakhimov reported in a clear voice.

At that moment in that Russian glade, where a man, with his hand bandaged, stood in disgrace before his unit, without his belt and without his Red Army star, every word, even the routine words of the report, was tense and gripping.

"Section Commander Blokha, advance with your section!" I ordered.

In silence they crossed the field. First came Blokha, who was of medium height, with six-footer Galliulin at his side; behind them came Murin and Dobryakov, the man who had been on duty at the machine-gun the day before. They walked gravely, in step, in line, without turning their faces from the wind that came blowing up from the side, involuntarily trying to hold themselves as erect as possible with the eyes of the battalion on them.

But they were in a state of excitement.

Blokha gave the order:

"Section, halt!"

Their rifles came down from their shoulders to their feet in one movement; he looked at me, forgetting to report.

I myself took a step towards him, raising my hand to the salute. He hurriedly responded and somewhat awkwardly stated, as demanded by regulations, that he had brought his section up on my orders.

You may wonder what the point of all this was, especially at such a time? It was precisely at such a time that I wanted to emphasize, down to the last detail, the fact that we were an army, a military unit.

The section had halted in a single rank, on the order, turned about and faced the parade.

I began:

"Comrades, men and commanders! The men who are standing in front of you yesterday took to their heels when I sounded the alarm and gave the order to 'Stand by!' A minute later, regaining their senses, they came back.... But one of them did not—their commander.... He shot himself through the hand, hoping to get away from the front. This coward, this traitor to his country, is about to be shot on my orders. There he stands."

Turning towards Barambayev, I pointed my finger at him. His eyes were fixed on me, on me alone, hoping against hope.

I went on:

"He loves life, he wants to enjoy the air, the earth, and the sky. So he decided: You can go ahead and die; I want to live. But that is the way parasites live, on someone else's back."

There was not a stir as they listened to me.

The hundreds of men facing me knew that not all of them would come through alive, death would take its toll, but at that moment they all stepped across a certain boundary. I had expressed the thought that just then filled their hearts.

"Yes, war takes its toll. But those who fall like warriors will not be forgotten by their country. Your sons and daughters will say with pride: 'Our father was a hero of the Great Patriotic War.' And your grandchildren and great-grandchildren will repeat their words. But are we all going to die? No. The soldier goes into battle not to die, but to kill the enemy. And he who returns home after fulfilling his duty as a soldier, he, too, will be called a hero of the Patriotic War. A hero! How proud, how sweet that sounds. We, honest soldiers, will taste the fruits of glory, while you. . . ." (I again turned to Barambayev.) "You will rot here, like carrion, dishonoured and forgotten. Your children will deny you."

"Forgive me," Barambayev said softly, in Kazakh.

"What! You remember your children, do you? You have made them the children of a traitor. They will be ashamed of you, they will hide the fact that you were their father. Your wife will be the widow of a coward, of a traitor, shot before the ranks. She will remember with bitterness the unhappy day when she consented to be your wife. We will write about you to your people at home. Let them all know that we had to execute you. . . ."

"Forgive me. . . . Send me into battle. . . ."

Barambayev's voice scarcely rose above a whisper, yet I knew that every man there had heard him.

"No!" I exclaimed. "We shall all go and fight. The entire battalion will go into battle! Do you see these soldiers whom I have called out of the ranks? Do you recognize them? They are the section which you commanded. . . . They ran away with you, but they returned. And they have not been deprived of the honour of going into action! You lived with them under the same roof, you ate from the same pot, slept with them under the same coat, like an honest soldier. They will go into action. Blokha and Galliulin and Dobryakov and Murin—all of them will go into action, will face shell-fire and bullets, But first they will shoot you—for you are a coward, who deserted in face of the enemy!"

Then I gave the command:

"Section, about turn!"

The men blenched, but obeyed. I also felt the blood drain out of my face.

"Section Commander Blokha! Take off the traitor's coat."

Blokha went over to Barambayev, his face set. I saw Barambayev's unbandaged right hand rise and begin to unclasp the hooks. That astonished me. The one man who, it seemed, had wanted to live more than all the others, had now no desire for life. He accepted death submissively. Blokha threw the great-coat aside and returned to his squad.

"Traitor, about turn!"

Looking at me pleadingly for the last time, Barambayev turned about. I gave the command:

"At the coward, traitor to his country, violator of his oath, section. . . ."

The rifles rose into position, froze to the men's shoulders. But one rifle trembled. . . . Murin was shaking violently and his lips were white.

And suddenly I felt unspeakably sorry for Barambayev.

3

Murin's rifle, trembling in his hands, seemed to be crying aloud, "Forgive him, have mercy on him!"

And the men who had not yet been in battle, who were not yet hardened against cowards, who waited tensely for me to pronounce the word: "Fire!" also seemed to be begging me: "Don't do it; forgive him."

Even the wind seemed to die away and the very air was hushed, as if it wanted me to hear that silent plea more clearly.

I saw the broad back of Galliulin, who was a head taller than the others. He was ready to carry out the order, he, a Kazakh, stood there aiming at a Kazakh who, but a few hours before, had been his closest friend. And his back, too, seemed to plead with me, "Don't make me do this, forgive him!"

I recalled everything good that I knew of Barambayev; remembered how he assembled and stripped his machine-gun with the skill of a gunsmith, how I had been secretly proud of him, thinking that we Kazakhs were also becoming a nation of mechanics.

... I am not a beast; I am only human. And so I shouted:

"As you were!"

It seemed as if the rifles were not put down but fell to the ground like iron. And a weight lifted from everybody's heart.

"Barambayev!" I shouted.

He turned round, with questioning, still unbelieving eyes, but eyes that already glowed with life.

"Put on your coat!"

"Me?"

"Put it on.... And return to your place in the ranks!"

He smiled confusedly, seized his coat with both hands, and, putting it on as he went and fumbling for the sleeve, ran up to the squad.

Murin, good-natured, be-spectacled Murin, whose rifle had trembled, furtively beckoned to him to fall in alongside and then gave him a comradely nudge in the ribs. Barambayev was a soldier once more and our comrade.

I walked over and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Will you fight now?"

He nodded and laughed. And everyone smiled. Everyone felt easier....

And you feel a shade more comfortable yourself, don't you? And the reader of this tale will also breathe a sigh of relief when he gets to the command: "As you were!"

But that wasn't what really happened. Everything I have just told you took place only in my imagination. The whole scene merely flashed through my brain, flashed by like a dream.

The truth was different.

...When I noticed that Murin's rifle was trembling, I shouted:

"Murin, are you trembling?"

He shuddered, straightened himself up, and gripped the stock of his rifle tighter and more firmly.

I repeated the command:

"At the coward, traitor to his country, violator of his oath, section ... Fire!"

And the coward was shot.

Judge me!

Once a poisonous spider in the desert bit my father, who was then a nomad. My father was all alone in the desert, with no companion but his camel. That spider's poison was fatal. My father pulled out a knife and cut out a piece of flesh from his own body, the part which the spider had bitten.

And now I did the same thing—with my knife I cut out a piece from my own body.

I am a human being. Yet although every human feeling in me was crying aloud, "Don't do it, have mercy, forgive him!" I could not forgive him.

I command a battalion, I am their father. I killed one son, but before me stood hundreds of other sons. I had to impress upon their souls that there cannot and never will be any mercy for the traitor!

I wanted every man to know: if you funk, if you betray, you will not be forgiven, much as we may want to forgive you.

Write this down, let everyone read it who has put on, or is about to put on, a soldier's uniform. Let them all know: maybe you were all right, maybe before this you were loved and praised; but whatever you may have been, for a military crime, for cowardice, for treachery, you will be punished with death.

"NOT TO DIE BUT TO LIVE!"

1

In the morning I made the rounds of the sector.

The men were digging trenches, just as they had been the day before.

But they were gloomy. Nowhere could I catch the sound of laughter, nowhere did I meet a smile.

There is no pleasure in commanding an unhappy army.

I drove up to the trenches. I noticed that one of the men had covered his trench with some sticks and had heaped up earth over them.

"What have you got there?"

"A trench, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"And what's that on top?"

"Woodwork, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Get out, and I'll show you what sort of woodwork you've got there."

The man climbed out; I took a pistol and planted several bullets in the flimsy log roofing.

"Now go back and take a look. Have the bullets gone through?"

Half a minute later he shouted readily:

"Yes, they have, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"What sort of contraption is this? What d'you think it is, a hut on your melon patch back home in Central Asia? Are you going to shelter from the sun there? Why don't you say something?"

"Wherever you go, it'll get you..." the man muttered reluctantly.

"What will?"

He did not answer. I realized that he was afraid of death.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked. "Don't you want to live?"

"Yes, I do, Comrade Battalion Commander...."

"Then clear all this rubbish to hell out of here. Cover the trench with logs as thick as telegraph poles, and lay 'em five rows deep so that even a direct hit won't get through...."

The man looked round sadly, first at the trench, then at the forest: there, in the forest, at some distance away, he would have to fell heavy logs and drag them here.

"Maybe it won't land here," he said.

Here, too, it lived, that word "maybe," although nobody liked it. It was no word for a soldier prepared for battle.

"Clear that away!" I shouted. "And I'll make you pull it down again if you don't lay five rows."

Sighing, the man got busy with his spade and shovelled off the earth that had been piled up on top.

I watched him in silence. He still could not believe that he, invulnerable in that trench, would hit back at the Germans from there. He did not believe that the Germans would fall from his bullets. He had something else on his mind.

2

Some of the platoons had musketry practice that day, according to the training programme.

A few targets, half-length and life-size figures in Nazi get-up, had been arranged at varying distances on the opposite bank, the direction from which the enemy might appear.

I wanted every man to get used to shooting from his trench, his underground home. I wanted him to get the range of everything in the locality lying ahead.

The men fired at the targets with machine-guns and rifles. I went from trench to trench and helped them with advice.

"You missed that time! Now try to understand why. Perhaps you didn't aim right, or didn't set your sights correctly. Well, now, check up on your sights and let's have another go. . . ."

At last the man managed to plant two out of every three bullets in the painted head of the target. Not a bad result, and in such cases it is difficult for the soldier to conceal his pride, but. . . .

"What are you looking so glum about? That's how you'll get 'em if they stick their noses in here."

"Can you get 'em with a bullet? And what's more, Comrade Battalion Commander, they won't come this way."

"Where will they come from?"

"Who knows. . . ."

These were words that I had heard before—fear of the unknown.

3

And again I was lost in thought.

Riding up and down that five-mile line, returning to my dug-out, eating, working at headquarters, or lying down for the night, I kept thinking all the time.

What had happened to the battalion? When I had shot a traitor the day before, a man who had fled to save his own life, had I killed with that shot the great force of love for life, had I crushed the great instinct of self-preservation?

I recalled something I had read in an article: "In battle there are two forces that struggle within a man: the consciousness of his duty and the instinct of self-preservation. A third force intervenes—discipline; and the sense of duty wins."

Was it really so? Our General, Ivan Vasilyevich Panfilov, expressed this in another way. Once, while still in Alma-Ata, during a conversation one night (don't ask me any questions about this just now—I'll tell you all about it later), Panfilov said: "The soldier goes into action to live, not to die!"

I took a liking to those words and sometimes repeated them. Now, getting ready for my first real battle, thinking of my battalion, which was destined to fight outside Moscow, I recalled those words of Panfilov's. And the day before, just before I gave the command to fire, those same words had come into my mind.

Was it indeed true that the will to live, the instinct of self-preservation, that powerful, prime-mover inherent in all living things manifested itself only in flight?

Did it not, this same instinct, develop with full strength and fury, when the living being fought, struggled, clawed and mauled in a life-and-death grapple, when he defended himself and then attacked?

In this unprecedented war for the future of our country and for the future of each of us, the will to live, this ineradicable instinct of self-preservation must be an ally, and not an enemy.

But how was I to arouse and retain that instinct?

4

At a certain time each day the companies arranged meetings for the discussion of newspaper articles on current events.

Once I decided to go round the companies at this time and listen to what the political officers had to say to the men.

In the first company I found Political Officer Dordia in charge. Rifle in hand, the men sat in a group in the open, near their trenches.

It was snowing lightly. The first gleaming flakes clung to the dark pines.

It was quiet, everyone was staring into the distance in a strained, tense way—they were waiting for something: at any moment everything might begin to roar, scream and howl, in the way they had heard of. Shells would shriek overhead, tanks would rumble across the fields, leaving black tracks on the early snow, firing as they went; men in field grey would come running out of the forest, drop to the ground and then jump up again, men who were coming to kill us.

Dordia was making a speech, glancing at his notes every now and then. What he said was true, his every word was gospel truth. I heard that German fascism had treacherously attacked our country, that the enemy was threatening Moscow, that the country demanded that we die if need be, but that we must not let the enemy pass, that we, men of the Red Army, had to fight without grudging our most precious possession—life.

I looked at the men. They sat there tired and morose, huddled close together, their eyes downcast or gazing into the distance.

Ah, Political Officer Dordia, they don't seem to be paying much attention to you! I felt that he himself, dreamy Dordia, a teacher before the war, was just as worried. He was no visitor to the battalion. He was one of us and, like the men he was speaking to, was about to go into action for the first time in his life.

Perhaps tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, he would be dodging under fire from trench to trench, his heart thumping, the earth heaving and crashing all round. And he would have to talk to the men there, instead of here, under the quiet sky.

I saw him later under such conditions—he was smiling and he had words of his own to say that weren't written on paper....

But that day, although, like the others, he was experiencing something infinitely important for him, he was unable to convey his feelings to the men. He kept repeating: "the country needs," "the country orders" ... and when he pronounced the words: "that we, if necessary, die but do not retreat," you felt, from his tone, that he was expressing his thoughts, the determination that had matured within him, but....

Why use trite phrases, Political Officer Dordia? Don't you know that not only steel, but words as well, even the most sacred, will gradually wear out, and will slip, like a worn gear-wheel, if you don't have the teeth recut?

And why do you keep saying: "die, die" all the time? Is that what you ought to be talking about now? Most likely you are thinking: there lies the harsh truth of war, a truth which must be faced unflinchingly, which must be accepted and instilled in others.

No, Dordia, that is not where the cruel truth of war lies.

5

I waited for Dordia to finish. Then I questioned one of the men.

"Do you know what we mean by 'our native land'?"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"All right, then, tell me...."

"It's our Soviet Union, our territory."

"Sit down."

I asked another, "And what do you think?"

"My native land is where I was born. Well, how shall I say it ... the locality...."

"Sit down. And you?"

"Native land? That's our Soviet Government.... It's....

Well, let's take ... let's say, Moscow.... We're defending it now. I was never there.... I have never seen it, but it is our native land...."

"That is to say, you have not seen your native land?"

He was silent.

"Well, then, what is 'native land'?"

Many of the men began to cry out: "You tell us!"

"All right, I'll tell you.... Do you want to live?"

"Yes."

"And you?"

"Yes."

"And you? Of course you do. And who doesn't want to live? Raise your hand!"

Not a single hand was raised. But their heads no longer drooped—the men had become interested. They had heard the word ' death" many times these last days, but I spoke of life.

"So you all want to live? Good."

"Are you married?" I asked one of the men.

"Yes."

"Do you love your wife?"

He looked embarrassed.

"Tell me, do you love her?"

"If I didn't love her I wouldn't have married her...."

"That's true. Have you any children?"

"Yes. A son and a daughter...."

"Have you a house?"

"Yes."

"A good one?"

"It seems good to me...."

"Do you want to go back home, and see your wife and kiddies again?"

"There's no time to think of home now ... we have to fight."

"Well, but after the war. Want to?"

"But who doesn't want to?..."

"You don't."

"How's that?"

"It all depends on you whether you go back home or not. It's up to you. You want to live? Then you have to kill those who aim to kill you. And what have you done so as to preserve your life in battle and return safe home after the war? Are you a good shot?"

"No. . . ."

"Well, there you are. . . . That means you won't kill the Germans. They're likely to kill you, and you won't get back home alive. Can you advance at the run from point to point?"

"So-so. . . ."

"Can you crawl well?"

"No. . . ."

"Now there you are . . . the Germans will get you. Then how can you say you want to live? Are you any good at throwing grenades? Or camouflaging? Or digging-in?"

"I can dig myself in all right."

"That's not true. You don't put your heart into it. How many times did I make you pull that roofing to pieces?"

"Once. . . ."

"And after that you still say you want to live? No, you don't want to live. Isn't that so, Comrades? He doesn't want to live, does he?"

By now some of the men were smiling, some of them felt a bit lighter at heart. But my soldier said:

"I *do* want to live, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"To want is not enough . . . you have to do something about it as well. Your words say you want to live, but your deeds will bring you to your grave and I'll have to lug you out of there with a hook."

There was a burst of laughter, the first genuine laughter I had heard for two days. I continued:

"When I tore that flimsy roofing off your trench I did it for your sake. When I check you for a dirty rifle, I do it for your sake. It isn't me who's going to fire it. Everything that we demand of you, everything we order you to do, is done for your own sake. Now do you know what we mean by native land?"

"No, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Native land—that's you! Kill the man who wants to kill you! Who's it for? You! Your wife, your father and mother, your children!"

The men were listening attentively. Political Officer Dordia sat down beside them and looked at me, his head thrown back. Every now and then he blinked as snowflakes settled on his eyelashes. Sometimes he smiled involuntarily.

While speaking, I addressed him as well. I wanted him, Political Officer Dordia, who was getting ready for his first battle just as all the others were, also to understand that the cruel truth of war lay not in the word "die" but in the word "kill."

I did not use the term "instinct," but I wanted to appeal to that, to the powerful instinct of self-preservation. I hoped by rousing it tc make the men strain every nerve and fibre for victory in action.

"The enemy is out to kill you and me," I continued. "I teach you and demand of you: Kill him, and know how to kill, because I want to live too. And every one of us orders you, every one commands you: Kill! We want to live! Demand of your comrade—you must demand it if you really want to live: Kill! *You* are the native land! We, our families, our mothers, our wives and children are the native land. Our people—they are our native land. Maybe a bullet will get you in the long run, but first *Kill!* Destroy as many as you can! And by doing this you will keep him, and him, and him among the living"—I pointed my finger to the men—"your comrades of the rifle and the trench! I, your commander, want to fulfil the bidding of our wives and mothers, the bidding of our people, I want to lead you into battle not to die but to live! Do you understand?

"That is all I have to say. Company Commander! Lead the men to the fire positions."

6

The commands rang out: "Platoon No. 1—Fall in!" "Platoon No. 2—Fall in!..."

The men jumped up, ran to their places, fell in, and stood at attention as per regulations, their ragged row of bayonets coming to a standstill in one straight line. You felt that this was a military formation, a disciplined, manageable force. With the intervals between them, the platoons looked like nests invisibly linked.

Perhaps my speech was a bit naïve, but at that moment it seemed to me that I had achieved my aim. Without giving up the idea of either duty or honour, the men had freed themselves from that obsessive, demoralizing word, "die."

GENERAL IVAN VASILYEVICH PANFILOV

1

He arrived at our position next day, the thirteenth.

We were not expecting him, but it happened that the company commanders whom I had summoned were sitting in headquarters as though waiting for him.

Need I describe our battalion H.Q.? Just look round at this. There, in the forest near Moscow, our quarters were the same sort of dug-out—that is, a sort of damp, log-built box dug into the earth. If you leant against the walls, you got stuck to the tar. A lamp burned day and night. On the outside, cables branched out in different directions, as if they were all gathered together here in one fist.

On their maps commanders were marking the mine fields which were to be laid during the night. Only the road and bridge near the village of Novlyanskoye were to be left open for wheeled traffic; all other approaches to the line were to be mined.

On the table near the lamp lay a large sheet of rough drawing-paper with the plan of our defences sketched in coloured pencil. Chief of Staff Rakhimov who draws and sketches excellently had made a good job of it.

I've still got that chart. Like to have a look at it? Neat work? Not only neat but also exact.

That light-blue winding ribbon is the Rusa River. The broken strip along the bank is the escarpment. The forests are outlined in dark green. The black dots over there are the mine fields. Those red half-circles with the bristles on them facing West indicate our defence points. And these different marks—you notice, they are all in red—are our rifle trenches, machine-gun nests, and the anti-tank and field guns allotted to the battalion.

The line we were holding was, as you know, very long—five miles for the battalion. We were stretched out like a "thread," as Panfilov said later. On that day, the 13th of October, I still had no idea that this thin thread would be the only obstacle in the way of the Germans in the vicinity of the Volokolamsk Highway when they reached the "distant approaches to the city" in their drive on Moscow.

But....

The company commanders were sitting round the lamp, filling in the mine fields on their maps.

There was a lot of joking about its being the 13th.

"My lucky number," said Lieutenant Krayev, commander of a machine-gun company. "I was born on the 13th and married on the 13th. Whatever I begin on the 13th turns out all right; whatever I wish for, I get."

4*

He had a peculiar way of talking. He seemed to be grumbling all the time, and you weren't always sure whether he was joking or serious.

"What would you like to have today, for instance?" someone asked.

Everyone looked with interest at Krayev's lean, bony face, which broadened at the jaw. He was known for coming out with the most unexpected things.

"A flask of brandy," he muttered, then broke into a laugh.

At that moment Chief of Staff Rakhimov came in. He always moved quickly and noiselessly, as if he were wearing bedroom slippers and not army boots.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, your orders have been carried out," he said in his usual quiet tone.

I had sent him on a distant reconnaissance to find out exactly where fighting was going on. At regimental H.Q. they had had no precise information. Rakhimov had returned much sooner than I had expected.

"Did you find out?" I asked.

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Give me your report, please."

"May I make it in writing?" he asked, stretching out a folded sheet of paper.

On the paper there were three words: "Germans are facing us." I felt a cold shiver run down my back. Had our hour really come?

Sensible, very sensible Rakhimov was! Having heard from the sentry that I was not alone in the dug-out, he had written those three words down on paper before coming in so as not to have to say them aloud, so that neither his look nor his tone should be the cause of fear.

I caught myself wishing I could hide the report from the others as though that would make reality unreal, would push it away or get rid of it.

I glanced at the coloured chart—I saw the mine fields, the river delineated by the anti-tank escarpment, the trenches, covered with four or five layers of logs, the machine-guns and cannon and, behind them all, in my mind's eye, one more thing—the man in uniform.

"Did you see them yourself?" I asked Rakhimov in Kazakh.

Of course I trusted Rakhimov but still I couldn't help asking him.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Fifteen to twenty miles from here. In the village of Sereda and in other villages."

"And in between? What's there?"

"No man's land."

"Well," I said in Russian, "it seems you are to get your wish, Krayev. A number of flasks of brandy have arrived at our address."

They all looked at me questioningly.

"Not to mention rum," I continued. "The Germans are facing us. Rakhimov, put us in the picture."

They listened to Rakhimov in silence, except for Krayev, who mumbled: "Good. . . ."

"What's good about it?" someone asked.

"Isn't it better than to keep on marking time? We've had enough of that. . . ."

Without asking permission, my batman, Sinchenko, suddenly rushed into the dug-out.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, the General's coming. . ." he whispered loudly.

I hastily put on my cap, adjusted my tunic and hurried to meet him.

But the door had already opened and our Divisional Commander, Major-General Ivan Vasilyevich Panfilov, walked in.

2

I sprang to attention and reported:

"Comrade Major-General! The battalion is engaged in fortifying the defence line. Company commanders are copying the plan of the mine fields. Battalion Commander, Senior Lieutenant Baurjan Momysh-Uly!"

"Anything out of the ordinary happened here?" asked Panfilov.

He knows about it, was the thought that flashed through my mind. I answered:

"Yes, Comrade General. A coward who had shot himself through the arm has been executed before the ranks."

"Why didn't you have him court-martialled?"

Excited, I began to explain. I said that in any other circumstances I should have done so. But in the present instance I had had to act instantly and assumed full responsibility for it.

Panfilov did not interrupt me.

This was the first time I had ever seen him in a short coat. It was of soft white Russian leather and gave off a faint but pleasant odour of tar. Obviously not made to measure, it was far too wide and loose for a man of his size, and accentuated his round shoulders and hollow chest, crossed by his Sam Browne. While listening he looked down, bending his wrinkled neck. It seemed to me he did not approve of what I had done.

"Did you shoot him yourself?" he asked.

"No, Comrade General.... The section which he had commanded shot him. But at my orders...."

Panfilov raised his head.

His heavy eyebrows, which rose sharply above small, almond-shaped eyes, were drawn together.

"You acted correctly," he said. Then, after a slight pause, he repeated: "You did right, Comrade Momysh-Uly. Draw up a report on the matter."

Only now did he seem to notice that everyone present was standing.

"Be seated, Comrades, be seated," he said, unbuckling his belt and taking off his coat.

Panfilov's khaki tunic with its unnoticeable stars of rank of the same colour, made his round shoulders more prominent.

"Rather cold here, Comrade Momysh-Uly.... Why don't you have the place heated? And I suppose you haven't got any hot tea?"

Going over to the stove, he touched the pipe, which had cooled, and glanced behind the stove as if looking for something, noticed the axe and, squatting down, he skilfully began to chop some small logs, holding the logs with one hand and chopping with light, even blows.

Rakhimov ran over to him.

"Comrade General, permit me, I...."

"But why? I like it.... Another time, of course, you'll have to look after your commander yourselves."

That was Panfilov's way—he was fond of making his criticisms in this indirect way.

But, softening even this scarcely noticeable sharpness, he gently added:

"Sit down, Comrade Rakhimov, sit down. Here, on this log."

I have never seen anyone else pile on firewood the way he did, propping up the logs like a tent. Some of the larger pieces he first weighed in his hand. Once he put a log in, but thought better of it and took it back.

I don't know, maybe it seems to you that a general shouldn't hesitate in anything, even in lighting a fire, but it didn't worry Panfilov and when he poked in a piece of birch bark and struck a match, the logs caught and began to crackle at once.

For a moment he sat down near the fire and the red glow played over his fifty-year-old, wrinkled, but fresh-looking face.

"That's better," he said, getting up, "it's more cheerful like this.... Have you finished, Comrade Momysh-Uly?"

"I have, Comrade General."

I handed him a short report. Panfilov read it by the light of the lamp, put the paper on the table, dipped his pen, and sighing, wrote: "Approved."

3

On the table, as you know, lay an excellently sketched plan of our defences. Moving the report aside, Panfilov looked long and closely at the plan.

"You seem to have fortified yourselves fairly well," he said. "But..." he scratched the back of his head with a purely Russian gesture. "I'll go round the sector with you later. I'd like to have a look at everything. You know what the situation is, Comrades?"

They answered hesitantly.

He drew a map out of his case—it was slightly worn especially at the folds—and opening it up, laid it on top of our plan.

"Now, Comrades, come round closer," he said. "The enemy has broken through here and here."

He pointed to several places near Vyazma, and after looking at the officers' faces to see if they had all understood, he continued:

"Our forces are engaged in the region of Gzhatsk and Sychovka.... Here are the main points of resistance."

Pressing lightly he indicated a few rough circles in various places on the map with the blunt end of a pencil. Then he looked again at the men gathered round.

"You thought perhaps," he said, putting down the pencil, "that the 'soldiers' who passed through your lines recently comprised our army?"

He smiled, and crow's-feet appeared at the corners of his small eyes. No one, except Krayev, had the courage to nod.

"Come now, own up!"

No one answered. Panfilov had touched on what had been most oppressing their thoughts.

"No, Comrades. The army is fighting. Do you think the Germans would have let us sit here so long if our units weren't putting up a hard fight? The enemy has now reached our line, but with small forces.... We have troops fighting in the rear of the Germans and nailing them down. The Division has a very long front to defend, but...."

Panfilov was silent for a moment.

"Our division has been reinforced with several anti-tank artillery regiments. I shall not tell you how many, they come from the reserve of the Supreme Command."

He picked up the pencil and bent over the map once more. His closely cropped head, whose hair seemed to be exactly half and half black and grey, was lowered as he scanned the topographical marks screwing up his eyes as though he were trying to make out something that was not very clear.

"What is the immediate task?" he said quietly, as though asking himself the question. "It is to use these guns against the Germans at the point of their main attack. If the main drive should happen to be directed here, then the artillery of the Supreme Command will be here, on your sector. You can convey this to your men.... By the way ... how long would it take you, Comrade Momysh-Uly, to muster your battalion?"

"For an alarm, Comrade General?"

"No, why for an alarm? Is an hour sufficient?"

"Yes, Comrade General...."

Whenever he visited us, Panfilov usually addressed the battalion after checking up on their preparedness for action. But now he took out his watch, rubbed the glass with his thumb, pondered a moment and said:

"No need to fall the battalion in, Comrade Momysh-Uly. I won't be able to—this little Sergeant-Major of mine won't let me." He pointed to his watch. "Well, then, Comrade Commanders, it's our turn now to fight.... If the Germans come our way, it's up to us to let them have it. If they come back for more—we'll let 'em have it again ... and we'll make mincemeat of them...."

Panfilov got up and everyone in the room stood up smartly.

"... We'll make mincemeat of them...."

Panfilov repeated this instruction from the Party to the Red Army and appeared to be listening to himself, to hear what it sounded like.

"Do you follow me?"

He almost always finished his conversation with this question, looking closely at those he had been speaking to.

"And now.... A glass of tea wouldn't do any harm, after the journey here. I think there was some sort of a hint of it, wasn't there, Comrade Battalion Commander?"

"Sinchenko!" I shouted, "the samovar! At the double!"

"O-ho! You've got yourselves a samovar!.. Good...."

We all smiled. Panfilov inspired people around him with a feeling of natural, genuine confidence.

After dismissing the commanders, he folded up his map and put it away.

4

Sinchenko came running in with the boiling samovar.

"Easy, easy there," Panfilov said. "Why run with a samovar?"

"There's a war on, Comrade General," Sinchenko answered rather smartly.

"Does that mean you have to run round like a madman?"

Sinchenko carefully set the samovar in position.

"You haven't got any green brick tea, have you?"

Panfilov had lived in Central Asia for a long time and had got used to that sort of tea.

"Afraid we haven't, Comrade General."

"That's a pity.... Let's have a look what you're brewing."

Sinchenko gave him a packet of tea that had been opened. Panfilov looked at the label and sniffed at the contents.

"Not bad.... A bit stale. Better keep it in a tin, my friend. All right, give me the tea-pot, I'll fix it."

He rinsed the white tea-pot out twice, dropped a pinch of tea into it, looked inside, frowned and added some more. Then, before he added the water, he stood it on the top of the samovar.

"Let it warm up, it'll be stronger," he explained.

The Germans were in front of us, Moscow was behind us, and on the forward line Panfilov was brewing tea with knowledge and skill.

"Don't put away this plan, Comrade Momysh-Uly," Panfilov said. "Let's go over it together.... You seem to be rather down in the mouth, Comrade Momysh-Uly."

Panfilov said this very softly, but I almost staggered, as if he had struck me with all his force. Why, only the day before I had said that very same thing to one of the men. Did I look to him the same as my men had looked to me the day before?

"What's bothering you, Comrade Momysh-Uly? Don't get up.... Please keep your seat.... Please...."

"You see, Comrade General...." It was humiliating to hear in my own voice that same note that I had been driving out of others. "Tell me, Comrade General, will the battalion have to hold these five miles?"

"No. . . ."

Panfilov was silent, then screwing up his eyes, broke into a smile. "No. . . . I am withdrawing one of the companies of your regiment today. . . . Maybe I'll have to take another later on. So that you will have to hold another half a mile or a mile. . . ."

"Another mile?"

"What can I do, Comrade Momysh-Uly? Now you advise me, please. . . ."

Panfilov said this without the slightest irony, and moved towards me pulling his stool along with him in his usual animated way, as if he really thought that I, a lieutenant, could give a general useful advice.

"What can I do?" he repeated. "Our line's like a thread and it's not difficult to break it. . . . Well, someone will break it. . . . What then?"

He looked at me curiously and waited for an answer. I was silent.

"It's because of that 'what then?' that I'm withdrawing those companies. . . . Imprudent?"

He asked that exactly as if I had said it. But I was listening without saying a word.

"We can't be merely cautious now, Comrade Momysh-Uly. We have to be. . ." again he screwed up his eyes knowingly, "thrice cautious now. . . . Then I think that we shall be able to keep him tied up for a whole month on the strip of land, between here and Volokolamsk. . . ."

"Volokolamsk? Retreat, Comrade General?"

"I don't think we'll get a chance to hold on here. But we'll have to manoeuvre in such a way that wherever he breaks through, he'll be met by our troops. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, Comrade General, but. . . ."

"Yes, yes, tell me; what's bothering you? The men are scared of the Germans, eh?"

"Yes, Comrade General."

I tried to be as brief as possible in reporting to him. Report is not quite the right word for Panfilov had a way of listening that made you feel you were saying something very clever that was of great importance to him. Without realizing it myself I allowed my report to develop into a narrative which I related in the way I had seen and felt.

After I had finished Panfilov sat for some time thinking.

"You're right, Comrade Momysh-Uly, we've nothing else to fear," he said at last. "That and nothing else is terrifying."

He got up, went over to the samovar, poured some boiling water into the tea-pot, put it back on top of the samovar and came back to the table.

Without sitting down, he bent over the chart and said once more, after giving it another cursory survey:

"You've dug in here pretty snugly. . . ."

However, his tone did not seem to express approval.

"It looks very crowded. Are you sure you've left enough lanes?" and taking a pencil he pointed to the mine fields. "Haven't you shut yourselves in, Comrade Momysh-Uly?"

"But all that's in front of us, Comrade General," I exclaimed, astonished.

"That's just it, that it's in front. . . . You've no room to move, it's so crowded. . . ."

I wondered, "Crowded? Crowded on a line five miles long? What is he talking about?"

Holding the pencil lightly, Panfilov drew a number of fine lines indicating passages through the mine fields. I still could not see what he was driving at. But Panfilov, criss-crossing the neat chart of our defences with a few light strokes of a plain black lead pencil—he did not like any others—made an arrow that pointed forward, towards the German positions.

I couldn't imagine what he wanted. Did he expect us to launch an attack against a growing concentration of German troops? And that after he had told me he was going to withdraw one company and that the battalion would have to stretch out for another mile or so? After telling us that we now had to be thrice cautious and thrice calculating? After he had said, "Between here and Volokolamsk?" And what was this—an order?

"If I were in your place," he said, lightly shading the arrow, "that's what I'd be thinking about. . . ."

From the tip of the arrow pointing to the German positions he drew a curve to indicate a return to our line, and glanced at me.

". . . I'd be thinking about. . . . In your pretty picture I don't see even a suggestion. . . ."

Taking out his watch, Panfilov turned towards the samovar.

"This gentleman also needs attention. . . . Let's have a glass of tea and go. . . ."

"Aren't you spending the night with us, Comrade General?" Sinchenko asked.

"No, my friend. . . . There's no time to spend the night anywhere now; we have to turn the night into day. . . ."

He smiled, took the tea-pot down, raised the lid, sniffed and said:

"Now that's what I call a drink. . . ."

He handed me a glass, his eyes twinkling slyly.

"Why, we ought to have a bit of a celebration. . . . Our Division is exactly three months old today. . . . We ought to have something a bit more substantial, but. . . . There'll be time enough for that yet. And it's exactly three months, Comrade Momysh-Uly, since you and I first met. . . . Do you remember the way you marched in those days?"

And again he smiled.

THREE MONTHS EARLIER

1

Yes, I remembered it. It was three months earlier, on July 13, 1941.

At the Kazakhstan training establishment, where I was employed as an instructor, we had a lunch break from twelve till one. I had finished my lunch and, as I left the dining-room, I saw a short, round-shouldered man in the uniform of a general standing in the yard. He was accompanied by two majors.

Generals were a rare enough sight in Alma-Ata so I had a good look at him.

The General was standing with his back to me, his hands folded behind him and his feet slightly apart. His head was half-turned towards me and it seemed to me that his face was very dark, almost black, like my own. His head was slightly bowed as he listened to one of the majors. A patch of neck, tanned dark-brown by the sun, and with big wrinkles, showed from under his high collar.

I was a gunner then, and wore spurs, and—I must confess to this weakness—not just ordinary ones but spurs with silver rowels that gave out a pleasant ring.

As I passed the General, I did the regulation goose-step, planting my feet down firmly on the ground—first one foot—ding!—then the other foot—dong!

The General turned round. There was not even a touch of grey in his neatly-trimmed moustaches. His cheekbones were rather prominent. His eyes were screwed up and slightly almond-shaped, with a Mongolian slant to them. "A Tatar" was my first impression.

In the office I asked my comrades, "Who's the General outside? What's he doing here?"

They explained that it was General Panfilov, War Commissar of Kirghizia.

You know what the War Commissar of a Republic is, don't you. He heads the Commissariat, a Soviet institution that maintains records of people liable to military service and organizes the spare-time training of men prior to their drafting for regular service.

There was some rivalry at that time between our two War Commissariats, the Kazakh and Kirghiz, as to which could achieve the best results—socialist emulation, you know. Once or twice a year the results were checked and new conditions were agreed upon, and it seemed most likely that the General had come in connection with that.

I sat down at the table, pulled out one of my files and opened it. I remember that on that day I had drawn up a plan for a cross-country run for Young Communist League members. This was, of course, all very necessary and important, but I was oppressed with a feeling of discontent.

The war had been going on for almost a month, the newspapers were daily reporting new enemy drives, new cities captured, and here was I, a senior lieutenant of the Red Army, sitting out the war in Alma-Ata about two thousand miles from the front—drawing up a plan for a cross-country run!

"That's not what you ought to be doing, Baurjan."

2

The door opened and the General came in accompanied the two majors. We stood up.

"Sit down, please," the General said. "How do you do. . . . Which of you is Senior Lieutenant Momysh-Uly?"

What was the matter? Why did he ask for me? I stood up anxiously. The General smiled.

"Please keep your seat, Comrade Momysh-Uly."

He spoke in a soft and somewhat husky voice. Coming over to me, he moved up a chair and sat down. Then he took off his general's cap with its red band and laid it on the table. His close-cropped hair showed a number of silver threads among the black.

There was nothing particularly commanding in his bearing, his face, his way of speaking or in his manner. Only his eyebrows, which broke sharply, almost at right angles, were in strange contradiction to this general impression. His eyebrows, like his moustache, showed no signs of grey.

"Permit me to introduce myself," he said. "My name is Ivan Vasilyevich Panfilov. Did you know that a new division is going to be formed here, in Alma-Ata?"

"I'm afraid I didn't."

"Well then.... I have been given command of the division. The Central Asiatic Military Command has appointed you battalion commander in the division."

He took out the order and handed it to me.

"Tell me, Comrade Momysh-Uly, how long will it take you to hand over?"

"Not long. I can report in two hours' time."

He thought it over.

"That's not necessary. Are you married?"

"Yes."

"Then ... say good-bye to your family today and report to me at twelve o'clock tomorrow."

3

The next morning, at five minutes to twelve, I walked up the broad flight of steps leading to the porch of the Red Army House where I was shown to the General's room.

Short, stooping, his head sunk between his shoulders, the General was sitting at a large desk, looking over some papers. I later met Panfilov a number of times, but that was the only time I ever saw him busy with papers. Later on, outside Moscow, the only paper which went with him everywhere was an ordnance survey map.

There was a map lying in front of him now as well. I recognized it immediately. It was a plan of the city and outskirts of Alma-Ata. On it lay a pocket watch, with the strap loose.

Glancing at his watch, the General rose quickly to his feet, pushed back his heavy arm-chair and came out from behind the desk. He was light on his feet so that you did not notice his age.

We talked standing. Panfilov would pace up and down and then come to a standstill, his hands behind his back, his feet slightly parted.

"And so, Comrade Momysh-Uly," he began, "the division does not exist as yet. There is no staff, there are no regiments, there are no battalions. In other words you have no one to command. We'll get all these things in due course; we'll build them up ourselves. But, in the meantime, you'll have to help me. I want to ask your advice."

The General walked over to the desk, thumbed through his papers, found the one he wanted, picked up a fat, red pencil, twisted it in his fingers, turned to me and said:

"This, Comrade Momysh-Uly, is the most foolish pencil in the world."

"Why so, Comrade General?"

"Because it's used to write resolutions with," he answered, jokingly. "This pencil," he continued, "can be used to make hasty decisions on matters you know nothing about. You draw a line on a map and the matter's settled! Take it away and hide it so that it doesn't fall into my hands again. And use it sparingly yourself, too, Comrade Battalion Commander."

He handed over the pencil with a smile and then asked me in worried tones:

"Have you any idea where we could get some boilers lined?"

My face must have expressed my astonishment, for he went on to explain:

"You see, our division will be something in the nature of a volunteer unit that is being formed over and above establishment, so we cannot count on getting any new equipment. And we won't even ask for it."

I had to answer many other questions, for the most part equally strange, and could not get over the impression that Panfilov was going into things which, it seemed to me, did not come within the province of a general.

Finally, he handed me a paper and gave me the following task:

"Here you will find the addresses of buildings which have been turned over to us as barracks," he said. "You'd better look them over and check up whether they are all suitable for the purpose. Have a look at the yards and see if there's enough space for drilling. And, by the way, see how they are off for kitchens, stoves, and water boilers."

This was another surprise: ought a general bother his head about such things?

Handing me the list and looking me straight in the eyes, Panfilov asked:

"Now, do you understand everything you've got to do?"

"Yes, Comrade General."

He picked up his watch. "How much time will all this take you?"

"I shall have a report ready by evening, Comrade General."

He raised his eyebrows sharply, as if displeased.

"What do you mean by evening?"

"By six o'clock, Comrade General."

"By six.... No.... Report to me at eight o'clock this evening."

4

The days slipped by and I was kept busy with the small commissions given me by the General. In the meantime the Division was taking shape and new officers were arriving.

5*

One day as I was leaving Panfilov I saw an artillery colonel coming towards me. He had long legs and a long face with sharply-cut lines at the mouth.

I stepped aside to let him pass; the colonel glanced at my badges and asked snappily:

"Gunner?"

"Yes, Comrade Colonel."

"Allotted to me?"

"I don't know, I'm appointed to command a battalion."

"To the infantry? How's that? Come along to the General."

During the course of the conversation with the General I learned that the impetuous colonel was the newly-arrived commander of the artillery regiment in our Division.

"Order him to report to me for duty, Comrade General. Let him take over a double battery today."

"What do you think about that, Comrade Momysh-Uly? Can you handle a double battery?"

"No, Comrade General, I can't."

Panfilov settled himself more comfortably in his chair. His Mongolian eyes expressed curiosity as they looked at me through the narrow slits of his eyelids. That was another characteristic of his—curiosity that age had not damped and that was really astounding in one of his age. He seemed to be waiting with interest to hear what the colonel would say to that.

"Why can't you manage it?" said the colonel, irately. "You've commanded a battery, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"So all right.... Or perhaps I ought to send a major to command a double battery? One that has finished a Military Academy? You can be sure we won't get anybody like that. Comrade General, please consider the matter settled."

But I also spoke, firmly but respectfully.

"It is my duty to be honest with you, Comrade General. I cannot handle a double battery, I've not had sufficient training."

Do you know who was responsible for my stubbornness? Professor Dyakonov, although he probably did not even know of my existence. Artillerymen all take off their hats to him, the author of three-volume *Theory of Artillery Fire.* I did not know higher mathematics and only had a nine-months' artillery officers' course after finishing secondary school so I could not understand that book. How could I handle a double battery, how could I concentrate their fire, when I could not compute *à la Dyakonov* or organize an accurate *Dyakonov volley*?

Later on, when I had an opportunity to see guns and gunners in action, I realized that the colonel had been right and not I. War is the best military college and after a bit of war experience I would have done no worse than the others and would have been no disgrace to the artillery.

"What do you want?" asked the colonel.

"A battery," I answered.

"Battery! Why, I have junior lieutenants commanding batteries. Will you take the job of assistant chief of staff?"

"God forbid!" burst from my lips before I realized it.

The General, who had been following the conversation with interest, laughed at me.

"That's wrong of you, Comrade Momysh-Uly. H.Q. isn't only paper work. And the red pencil is not obligatory. . . ."

"What red pencil?" asked the colonel.

"That concerns you, as well, I believe," said Panfilov jokingly to the colonel, "but I'll tell you about it later."

He became suddenly serious.

"I'll think it over. You may go, Comrade Momysh-Uly," he added.

5

The continuation came the next night when I was orderly officer at Division H.Q.

Panfilov worked till long after midnight, sending for one officer after another.

The Division was being born. Schools left empty during the summer holidays served us as barracks. Here came the new recruits from the city and from near-by collective-farm villages, carrying knapsacks and small suitcases. They were mostly men past their youth, in the early thirties, and the majority of them had never served in the ranks before.

At this hour they were fast asleep and soon our big brick building quietened down.

A door creaked on its hinges and I heard steps in the corridor. I hastily got up and adjusted my tunic as I recognized the General's footsteps.

He glanced in through the open door.

"Is that you, Comrade Momysh-Uly? Orderly officer?"

He had a towel over his arm. He had taken his tunic off, and was wearing a white shirt. His face looked tired.

The room was full of tobacco smoke. He threw the window wide open and sat down on the sill.

"I was thinking of you, Comrade Momysh-Uly, thinking of you," said Panfilov. "What do you think I ought to do with you?"

"I'll go wherever you send me, Comrade General. But if you ask my opinion. . . ."

"Sit down, sit down. . . . Well, and if I ask your opinion?. . ."

"I would ask you not to give me a double battery, Comrade General, but a single battery or a battalion."

"Battalion? You know, Comrade Momysh-Uly, it isn't easy to command a battalion, either. . . . Do you know anything about field tactics? Have you read anything on the subject?"

I mentioned some of the things I had read.

"What about the tactics of withdrawal? Has that interested you?"

"No, Comrade General. . . ."

"Then it certainly won't be easy for you to command a battalion," he repeated.

The way he looked at me made me blush and my vanity was touched.

"Possibly," I blurted out. "But I know how to die honourably, Comrade General."

"Together with the battalion?"

"Together with the battalion."

Unexpectedly Panfilov burst out laughing.

"Thanks for such a commander!. . . No, Comrade Momysh-Uly, it would be far better to lead your battalion to repulse ten, twenty, thirty attacks—and bring it out intact. That's what the soldier will thank you for."

He jumped off the window-sill and sat down beside me on the couch.

"I'm a soldier myself, Comrade Momysh-Uly. . . . A soldier doesn't want to die. He goes into action not to die, but to live. And he wants commanders of the same sort. . . . And you say it so glibly: 'I shall die with my battalion. . . .' There are hundreds of men in a battalion, Comrade Momysh-Uly. . . . How can I entrust them to you?"

For a time I did not say anything. Nor did Panfilov, who kept glancing at me. At last he broke the silence:

"Well, Comrade Momysh-Uly, what have you got to say for yourself? Are you going to promise to lead them into action in order to live and not to die?"

"I will, Comrade General."

"O-ho, spoken like a real soldier! And do you know what you need for that?"

"Will you please tell me, Comrade General. . . ."

"You're a sly devil, I can see! . . . First, Comrade Momysh-Uly, it's this. . . ." He tapped himself on the forehead. "I'll tell you a secret," and he looked round jokingly, as though he were afraid somebody was listening, and then whispered in my ear. "There are fools at the front as well."

He stopped smiling and continued:

"There's one other very cruel thing necessary . . . very cruel . . . discipline."

"But you're—" The words slipped out accidentally and I bit my tongue to check myself.

"Go on, say it! You wanted to say something about me?"

I did not dare continue.

"Go on, say it! Or must I order you to?"

"I was going to say, Comrade General, that you are very lenient. . . ."

"Nothing of the sort, that's only your impression."

It seemed that my words had offended him. He got up, picked up his towel and started walking up and down.

"Lenient. . . . What you mean is that I don't run the Division by shouting at my men. Lenient, you say, . . . not a bit lenient. . . . Well, what about it? Do you want the double battery or not? Eh?"

I did not reply, I simply stood staring at the General.

"You ought to go to a Military Academy," he said. "All right, have it your way, the colonel won't like it, but . . . somehow I'll fight a rearguard action. You'll take command of a battalion."

"Yes, Comrade General."

And that's how it happened that I, an artillery officer, was given command of an infantry battalion.

6

I spent a few more days at H.Q. after that. I studied him closely in an attempt to find out how that easy-going general, who seemed to have no bristles at all, could run the Division.

But he was not so easy-going as he seemed.

On one occasion, a staff officer who had apparently grown used to his constant "Sit down, please," walked in and sat down without being invited to do so.

"Stand up!" Panfilov ordered him sharply. "Leave the room, and do a little thinking before you come in again."

Whenever he gave an order Panfilov never forgot to check up whether it had been carried out in the time allotted. One of his favourite gestures was to stroke the glass of his pocket watch with his thumb. Sometimes he seemed to be petting a favourite animal. In the event of delay he always demanded an explanation.

I once saw him give a severe wigging to an officer who had not finished his task in time.

"You are a slack, undisciplined officer," he said. "I have known you only a few days, but, unfortunately, you have already shown yourself to be a sluggard."

His peculiar eyebrows came together and the break seemed to be even sharper. But he did not shout. He only spoke a little louder and more distinctly than usual, and that gave his words all the more weight.

Another trivial incident made an indelible impression on me.

On the General's instructions, a soldier and I had taken the first trench mortar to reach the Division to the stores. Panfilov wanted to see that trench mortar.

I shouted through the window to a soldier: "Fetch the trench mortar from the stores and look sharp! I want it here in five minutes' time!"

Turning around I saw Panfilov looking at me with a quizzical look in his eyes. It was that same ironical glance which had once caused the blood to rush to my cheeks.

"He won't be able to do that in five minutes, Comrade Momysh-Uly," the General said.

He did not add another word. But this simple comment made a deep impression on me.

How many times had I thoughtlessly shouted, in just the same way: "In five minutes!" But Panfilov thought before he spoke.

LYSANKA AND A HORSY TALE

1

At last the day came when I took leave of the General and started off to take over my battalion. But before this I must tell you about something else that happened.

For my commissions about town I had at my disposal one of the horses from the Divisional Headquarters' stables. It was a splendid full-grown mare by the name of Lysanka, with white stockings, a white blaze on her forehead and a tender mouth. In the week and a half that I spent at H.Q. in Alma-Ata I had trained Lysanka quite a lot.

I had to join the battalion, then at the village of Talgar, about 17 miles from the city, and was going there by car.

I got up at 5 a.m., when there was not a soul stirring at headquarters, and went out into the yard, ready to leave.

The car was late in arriving. I wanted to take a last look at Lysanka before leaving. Going into the stable I patted and fondled her. Anticipating the piece of bread or sugar she usually got for good work, she nibbled my hands playfully with her soft lips and nuzzled up to me.

But I did not give her anything, for she had done nothing to earn it. As if guessing my thoughts she began to step from one forefoot to the other, just as I had taught her to do to show off her paces. I smiled, saddled her in a trice, and led her out.

After trotting several times round the yard I brought her into a hand canter, then without thinking about what I was doing, I started to put her through her paces.

As I have already said, it was very early. The yard seemed empty.

Suddenly a voice broke the silence: "Now, if you can only manage your battalion like that, Comrade Momysh-Uly!"

There, on the veranda, stood the General. Embarrassed, I dismounted.

"Carry on, please, carry on!" Panfilov said. "It's been a pleasure to watch you!"

He came over.

"So that's something you've been keeping quiet about.... And out there"—he said with a wave of his arm—"will you be able to handle the men in the same way?"

I replied: "Do you know, Comrade General.... I was once told the very same thing. That's to say, it wasn't exactly said...."

"Yes?..."

"It was done so that I could not live it down for a whole year."

"That's interesting. Tell me about it."

But I had already repented my words. The devil himself must have prompted me to open my mouth just then. Why take up the General's time with anecdotes about my life, anecdotes that could interest only me? Trying to be as brief as possible, I told him that once, when I was a junior lieutenant, I had been insolent to my superiors, roared at my subordinates and had been unable to maintain discipline in my platoon. I was reprimanded, placed under arrest and later the regimental commander gave me a unique lecture on the way to manage a horse. He put it this way: "Do you know what I mean by 'managing' something? If I give you the example of an engine-driver or a motor-car driver, that won't mean much to you, a man of the steppes. . . ." And so he began to talk about horses. That lecture was effective. . . .

"Not like that," said Panfilov, "give me more details. What did he say to you?"

"Only what everybody knows, Comrade General. I knew it without his telling me. . . ."

"But tell me, all the same. . . ."

"He spoke about good horsemanship. He said that in the hands of a good rider a horse could do anything, dance even. . . . Then he talked of the means of controlling a horse. He spoke of the reins and the bit, the snaffle and curb, the movement of the little finger on the rein . . . that is already control."

"I see . . . go on . . . that's interesting. . . ."

"He said that a good rider never moves his whole arm, or even hand. . . . Only a swine-herd pulls on a horse's mouth. And so on, in the same vein. . . ."

"No, no, let me have the details—I really beg you . . . please go ahead. What else did he say?"

Panfilov seemed to be extraordinarily interested. There was a smile on his lips and little wrinkles played about his eyes.

"He spoke of other ways of controlling a horse. . . . One way is to shift your weight in the saddle, doing it imperceptibly. . . . Then he talked about the rider's leg. There are a score of ways of controlling a horse with the spurs alone—the direct dig, the light prick, and so on. . . . But a good rider hardly ever uses his spurs. It is sufficient for him to press the horse with the calf of his leg for the horse to obey at once. But how could one achieve such control?"

"Well.... And how *do* you?"

Incited by Panfilov's interest, I was now speaking enthusiastically.

"That's it, how is the rider to get the horse to respond at once to his slightest wish? The main thing is perseverance. Whenever she jibs, punish her, never let her get away with it. And when she does well—encourage her. Don't do it a hundred, but a thousand times. He explained all this quietly and then said: 'You may go....'"

"And you?"

"At first I couldn't make out why he had sent for me. I turned about and went out. In the doorway the idea struck me like a blow: 'Is a man nothing more than a horse to him? I'm no more than a horse to him!' And I wanted to turn back and shout: 'I'm no horse of yours!'"

Panfilov burst out laughing. I had never seen him so merry. Taking out his handkerchief, he dabbed his eyes, sparkling with tears of merriment, and then said:

"Not a bad story, not a bad story at all. So only swineherds tug at a horse's mouth?"

Laughing, he patted Lysanka and asked:

"You like this horse, don't you, Comrade Momysh-Uly?"

"Very much, Comrade General."

"Take her along with you. She's yours.... Let her stay with you in the battalion...."

"Thank you, Comrade General...."

Without waiting for the car, I set off for my battalion on Lysanka.

2

You and I have already agreed that I shall not give any descriptions of nature. Those who know how will do that better than I can.

Some day when the war is over, you can come to see me in the summer, and then you'll see how beautiful Kazakhstan is and you will describe the country round Alma-Ata, Talgar, a village on the Talgarka, a rapid mountain stream.

I found my way to the building of the agricultural institute, where my battalion was quartered, and made the acquaintance of Rakhimov, my Chief of Staff, a lean, active Kazakh, who, only the day before, had been an agronomist, and was still wearing his civilian clothes. A mountain climber's badge gleamed on the lapel of his jacket, but this mountaineer did not know how to stand to attention, or how to report to a superior officer.

Together we went on a tour of inspection through the building. It was crowded with men, but I was the only one in uniform. Men were wandering aimlessly in the corridors; in one room they were singing; from the corridor windows they were calling to women. Nobody called them up to attention, nobody saluted his C.O.

I noticed the cigarette butts on the floor, sighed deeply and ordered the battalion to parade.

It took them a long time to fall in and they were clumsy at it. Just try and imagine that parade: many of them came out in nothing but singlets, some in slippers and a few of the more responsible put on their jackets. Some were wearing caps, others were bare-headed.

Our mountaineer somehow managed to dress the ranks and called them up to attention, but instead of reporting he stood and stared straight at me. I heaved another sigh and approached the ranks.

I greeted the men and they answered as best they could. I then introduced myself and informed them that I had been appointed commander of the battalion.

"You are still in civilian clothes," I went on, "but the country has already called you up for active service. Some of you are well-dressed, others not so well. . . . Yesterday you followed different professions, had different incomes, yesterday there were factory managers and rank-and-file farmers amongst you. From today onward you are all N.C.O.'s and men of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. I am your C.O. I give orders, you obey them. I dictate my will, you fulfil it."

I purposely spoke in the sharpest tones. "Every one of you will do exactly as I order. Yesterday you could have argued with your manager; yesterday you had the right to discuss whether he had been right and had acted legally. From today the country deprives you of that right. From today you know only one law, your commander's orders."

I could see that some of them were giving me queer looks: all democracy was being abolished with a single word.

"Whoever has a different opinion," I continued, "may put it in an envelope and send it home while we are still near by. Military discipline is rigorous but that's what holds the army together. Do you want to defeat the enemy that is in a hurry to enslave our country? Then remember—all this is essential for victory!"

Then I spoke to them briefly about honesty, duty and honour. I told them that honesty in respect of his country, his government, his commander, was the highest virtue in a soldier. An honest man is a man with a conscience.

"You may have knowledge and ability," I continued, "you may be dexterous and skilful, but if you have no conscience, don't expect mercy from me!"

And finally came honour. I explained this in my own way. There are two Kazakh proverbs. One of them says: "The hare dies of fright at the rustle of a reed: a hero dies for honour's sake." The other one is just five words: "Honour is stronger than death." I quoted these proverbs in Kazakh and then translated them into Russian. Only one-third of the battalion was Kazakh; the remainder were Russians and Ukrainians.

When I finished a bold voice rang out from the ranks:

"Comrade Battalion Commander, permit me to say. . . ."

A strapping broad-shouldered fellow in a black Russian blouse stepped half a pace forward.

"No!" I said. "This is not a meeting. Company commanders, dismiss your units!"

That was my first speech, my first meeting with the battalion.

3

I walked down the corridor to the room prepared for me.

"Comrade Battalion Commander! Permit me to say. . . ."

In front of me stood a private—the one who had called out to me as Battalion Commander. His hair had not yet been cropped and an unruly curl hung down from under the peak of his cap.

"Your name?" I asked.

"Private Kurbatov."

He stood erect, at attention.

"Have you ever served in the army before?"

"No, Comrade Battalion Commander. . . . Only in the Railway Militia."

"Well, then, Comrade Kurbatov. . . . Before addressing yourself to the Battalion Commander, you must have the permission of your company commander. Please go to him. . . ."

"He doesn't pay any attention, Comrade Battalion Commander. It's about the guard here. . . . There's no sentry on the back door, Comrade Battalion Commander. Nor at the side gate. . . . And suppose, Comrade Battalion Commander, something. . . ."

"Fine fellow!" I thought. I liked his intensity, his persistence, his frank look and straight shoulders. But I merely said:

"About turn!"

Kurbatov flushed. He looked at me with a fixed stare that boded no good. I could understand him but still, I answered with another fixed stare. For an instant he hesitated, then he turned smartly about and strode off down the corridor. Even his flushed neck seemed to have been insulted.

Turning to Rakhimov, who stood by me, I said:

"Comrade Chief of Staff, appoint Private Kurbatov section commander."

Someone touched me from behind.... Turning round I noticed a hand withdrawn uncertainly.

"I've been to my company commander.... He told me to apply to you, Comrade Battalion Commander...."

I saw a man in glasses. This was my first meeting with Murin. He was wearing his jacket and his necktie was a little bit one-sided; he smiled as he spoke and did not know what to do with his hands. His lean fingers and his long, pale face were almost untouched by the sun in spite of the fact that it was July.

"I was found unfit for active service, Comrade Battalion Commander, but I volunteered for service in the battalion all the same," he announced proudly. "I proved that in glasses I can see perfectly.... There, see that fly up there, Comrade Battalion Commander, on the ceiling! I can see it clearly...."

"Very good, Comrade. I am quite convinced. Go on!"

"But in the battalion I've been assigned to non-combatant duty, Comrade Battalion Commander, they gave me a horse and cart. And I haven't the faintest idea about horses. Besides I didn't come here to do that sort of thing. I want to fight, Comrade Battalion Commander, I want to be a machine-gunner."

I asked him his name and said:

"That can be arranged, Comrade Murin. I'll have you transferred.... You may go...."

But he hesitated, as if unable to believe that the matter ended there. He was anxious to go on talking, to unburden his feelings.

"I heard your speech, Comrade Battalion Commander.... What you said was quite right.... Every order of yours will be law for me, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"You may go," I repeated.

He looked at me with astonished eyes, and then went on as if he had not heard me:

"I am a musician, Comrade Battalion Commander. A post-graduate student at the Conservatoire. But everyone should take up arms now, Comrade Battalion Commander."

To drive his point home he kept snapping his fingers. I shouted:

"What are you standing like that for? Hands at your sides!"

Murin hurriedly straightened himself up.

"I've told you twice to go. And you? You seem to think you are asking for the most difficult thing: to be allowed to shoot! No, Comrade Murin, the most difficult, the hardest thing in the army, is to obey!"

Murin's lips moved, as if he wanted to speak, but I continued:

"There will be many a time when you will think that the commander is unjust, and will want to argue. But he'll shout: 'Silence!' at you, that much I can promise you. You may go...."

Murin went.

4

That day I made the acquaintance of the company and platoon commanders, drew up a training schedule, arranged rosters for guards, and orderlies and attended to administrative affairs. It was already late in the evening when I found myself alone.

I took out the Infantry Training Manual I had been given at headquarters out of my bag and began to read. Then I put it aside and sat lost in thought.

The Great Patriotic War had begun. Day by day the Hitlerites were driving deeper and deeper into our territory. On that day, a month after the invasion, they had reached Smolensk, had crossed the Dnieper and, judging by the map, were racing on to seize Leningrad, Moscow and the Donets Basin. They staked everything on the *Blitzkrieg*, the lightning drive, that was their tactic and their faith. They hoped to make an end of us before we had time to muster our reserves.

When would Red Army G.H.Q. transfer our Division to the front? How many days, how many weeks would we be allowed for training?

Events were developing with such rapidity, the situation at the front was so critical that the Supreme Command might find it necessary to send us into battle in two or three weeks' time.

How could I, in that unbelievably short time, take these seven hundred men that were at that moment sleeping restlessly under that roof, with bags under their uncropped heads, healthy, honest men, devoted to their country but who were not soldiers, were not schooled in military discipline—how could I take them and make of them a military force capable of not only standing up to the enemy but of striking fear into him?

You may think it strange that that night, when I lay thinking of the great war and of the front I should soon be going to with my battalion, when I was thinking of life and death, when I was thinking of the great, the most important of all things on which one does not often concentrate one's thoughts, the "horsy story" came to my mind. General Panfilov had chuckled when he heard and I, too, had laughed, but, still....

I remembered how I, a free Kazakh, an untamed horse of the steppes who could not suffer a bridle, had been made into a soldier. Those first months in the army were difficult, unendurably difficult, for me. It humiliated me to run up to my commander at the double, stand at attention in front of him, listen to his imperative, laconic: "No answers! About turn!"—while inside me everything rose in revolt: "Why should I hold my tongue? Am I his slave? Am I not a man, the same as he is?"

And it was not only internal revolt. I would turn first pale, then red, and would not submit.

Do you know what they did with me in the end? I was sent to an officers' training course and became a commander myself, an officer in the Red Army.

Only gradually did I come to understand the necessity of absolute submission to the will of one's commander. This is the foundation of the army. Without it, even men who love their country passionately will never win a single battle.

But how could I accomplish this quickly enough? Why, the days at my disposal were numbered—a few weeks.... How could I, in this short time, create a disciplined, trained force such as would strike fear into the enemy, such as might truly be called a battalion?

THE TOBACCO MARCH

1

I won't go into all the details of how I trained the men. Let me describe just one march to you, one that is known in the battalion annals, so far unwritten, as the "tobacco march."

Seven or eight days had passed since I had taken over the battalion. We already had been issued arms and equipment; we had done some rifle drill and had practised digging-in, running, crawling, and marching.

One evening we received orders to set out at dawn on a thirty-mile route march, reach a certain point in the valley of the Ily, bivouac there for the night and do the thirty miles back to Talgar by the next evening. Similar stiff marches were ordered for the other battalions—General Panfilov was putting the Division through its paces.

The men got ready for the march the evening before and slept all night. Sharp at dawn, before the sun was over the horizon, the battalion fell in.

You, for instance, who have never been a soldier, would very likely have thought that we had a veteran regiment here. The ranks were carefully dressed. New bayonets glinted on the rifles. The men were in full marching order: great-coats rolled up and slung across their shoulders, gas-masks, entrenching tools in new khaki covers, steel helmets attached to haversacks, grenades and cartridge pouches—one hundred and twenty rounds per man—slightly dragged down their belts. Slightly dragged down.... In many cases—not so slightly. My eye immediately noted that—and also the loosely rolled, clumsy great-coats, haversacks on loose braces, grenades hanging across the men's bellies. Only a few were turned out like real soldiers. Among them was Kurbatov.

Calling Kurbatov out of the ranks, I said:

"Comrades! Here is an N.C.O. who is properly turned out for the march. He will find things easier than the others. Just see how neatly everything is adjusted, how his belt is pulled tight. I have explained this to you a dozen times and shown you how to do it, but still you don't understand. Apparently my tongue is not sharp enough. I've nothing more to say, I'll leave it to your rolled great-coats, gas-masks, entrenching tools and haversacks to do the talking.... You think they have no tongues? They have, I assure you! And a much sharper one than mine. Private Garkusha, fall out in front!"

Pug-nosed, ever-smiling Garkusha came running up. His grenades had crept round to the front and bobbed up and down as he ran.

"Ready for the march?"

"Ready, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Fall in beside Kurbatov. Private Golubtsov, fall out in front!"

Golubtsov's rolled great-coat was so clumsy that it curled up round his cheek. His haversack hung loosely down his back.

"Ready for the march?"

"Ready, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Fall in beside Garkusha."

In this way I picked out about ten men whose equipment was particularly awkward and placed them at the head of the column.

"Battalion, atten-tion! Right turn! By the right. Quick —march!"

We moved off.

I marched alongside the men whom I had called out of the ranks and glanced at them out of the corner of my eye.

For ten or fifteen minutes they marched along easily. Garkusha's bag of grenades kept banging him between the legs all the time, but very slightly. At last a hand stretched out towards them to move it aside.

Golubtsov made an effort to adjust his great-coat: the coarse nap was beginning to rub the skin of his neck.

A third man's entrenching tool was banging him on the leg.

They tried to make adjustments as they marched but it did not help.

Another ten minutes and Garkusha was bending over backwards and shoving his belly forward, to prevent his grenades from swinging. Catching my glance, he gave a forced smile. Golubtsov was craning his neck and trying to shove the roll away with his chin. His haversack had also begun to worry him. Shoving his hand under the strap, he tried to raise the bag higher unnoticed. Garkusha stopped sticking out his belly and began to lean over to one side and lag behind.

"Garkusha, step out!" I ordered. "Keep your dressing by Kurbatov!"

The bomb bag was banging him again.

In this way we covered about four miles. Then I halted the battalion and again demonstrated Kurbatov's turn-out to the men. After this I shouted:

"Garkusha, fall out in front!"

He stumbled up, almost doubled over. There was laughter in the ranks.

"Well, Garkusha, report. Are you ready for the march?"

He maintained a glum silence.

"Had a talk with your bomb bag?"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander!"

"Well, then, tell the men what it said to you."

He was silent.

"Speak up, don't be shy. . . ."

"What shall I tell them? A Russian doesn't believe what he just hears, he has to feel it. . . ."

"Well, did you?"

"Did I?. . . Those blasted grenades. . . ."

Here followed an unprintable remark which raised a storm of laughter in the ranks. Garkusha joined in the laughter.

Next I called out Golubtsov. The sweat was streaming down his face and his neck was chafed raw.

"Now, Comrades, have a look at him. . . . Did your great-coat have anything to say? And your haversack? Tell us what they taught you. . . ."

And I made Golubtsov speak out in front of the men. So, one after another, I dealt with everyone who had been bothered by sloppily-adjusted equipment. Then I said:

"Who has a hard job of it marching when his roll is too bulky, or his grenades are not in the proper place, or his haversack is dangling? You or the battalion commander? You! I've explained this to you twenty times, but apparently you said to yourselves: 'Oh, all right, we'll do it for him so he won't pester us.' And you did it just anyhow. However, as matters turned out, it was not 'for him,' but for yourselves. Your equipment has already impressed this on some of you. Now, during this halt, let every man take the opportunity to adjust his equipment again. If I see that there are still men who haven't understood me I'll call them out of the ranks and let them have a talk with their equipment here, in front of me, and then they'll see whose tongue is the sharper."

After that I never had to call anyone out of the ranks again. No one had any desire to have another "talk" with his equipment.

2

The battalion moved off again.

A thirty-mile march under a broiling July sun is no easy matter, especially for men unused to marching.

The companies, I noticed, were no longer keeping their proper intervals. Some of the men were lagging behind. I drew the attention of the officers to this. After a while I checked up on them again. My remarks had not had the necessary effect; the whole column, from front to rear, was now stretched out over a long distance. I spoke more sharply to the officers, but again without appreciable effect. Words, evidently, were not enough. The officers themselves were already tired, some of them were limping.

I rode to the head of the column and shouted:

"Pass the word down the column: commander of the Machine-Gun Company to report to me immediately."

Fifteen minutes later Krayev, the lanky commander of the company, came running up, panting for breath.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, reporting as ordered!"

"Why is your company not maintaining close formation? When will you learn to keep the proper distance? Unless you close up your company I shall call you to the head of the column again! That's all. You may go!"

It's no easy matter for a man on foot to overhaul a battalion on the march, which stretches for more than half a mile.

Then I summoned Sevryukov, Commander of No. 2 Company. Sevryukov was no longer a young man. Before the war he had been head bookkeeper at the Alma-Ata tobacco factory. When he reached me he could scarcely get his breath.

After listening to my criticism, he said:

"It's hard on the men, Comrade Battalion Commander. Couldn't they dump part of their equipment on the baggage carts?"

I answered sharply: "Get that nonsense out of your head."

"Then what can we do with the men who fall behind, Comrade Battalion Commander? How can I force men to do something they really can't do?"

"What can't they do? Obey orders?"

Sevryukov said no more.

One by one all the company commanders were ordered up to me.

But there were still some stragglers at the rear of Sevryukov's company.

I looked at him, this forty-year-old man, marching grimly along at the head of his company. The hair on his neatly cropped temples was grey. Streams of sweat were running down his dust-grimed face. Would I really have to call him up to me at the double again? He was having a hard time of it as it was! But what could I do?

He was sorry for his men, and I was sorry for him—

but later on?... What would happen to us over there—when we were in the thick of it?

I put my horse into a trot, and when I was in front of the battalion sent back the order:

"No. 2 Company Commander report to the head of the column!"

This time it did the trick.

I let the battalion pass me again. Sevryukov was now marching not at the head of his company, but at the rear. He seemed to have more energy and even his voice had changed. His tone was now crisp and authoritative.

The whole column had smartened up and the platoons were keeping the regulation intervals. There were no more stragglers.

And so we reached our destination, having covered thirty miles without a single man falling out.

But the men were exhausted. At the command: "Fall out!" they dropped flat on the grass. One thought was in everyone's mind: they would soon be given dinner and then ... sleep.

But things turned out otherwise!

3

Our field kitchens had come with us, of course. But when we reached the place where we were to bivouac I gave orders that they should not be used, that no firewood was to be cut but that the rations should be distributed to the men raw: so much meat, cereals, fat, and so on.

Both men and commanders were taken aback. The food was all raw—what could they do with it?! Many of them had never cooked anything in their lives before and hadn't the faintest idea of how to make a stew, even. I heard complaints raised:

"We have kitchens! They have to cook dinner in the kitchens!"

"Silence!" I shouted. "Do as you're ordered! Every man will prepare his own dinner!"

And there, along the bank of the river in the wide Kazakh steppe, many fires began to blaze. Some of the men were so tired and dispirited that they did not bother to make anything, but went to sleep hungry. Some burned their porridge, others let their soup boil over, most of them spoiled more than they ate. This was their first lesson in cookery.

In the morning I again ordered the rations to be distributed raw and said that the field kitchens were not to be used.

When the battalion fell in after breakfast I addressed the men. I told them something like this:

"Firstly. You are dissatisfied, Comrades, that the march was so long and so hard. It was so for a purpose. We are going to fight, we are going to march not for thirty or even for a hundred, but for many hundreds of miles. In war, to surprise the enemy, and to deal him a blow from an unexpected quarter, we will have to make much longer and more difficult marches than this one. This is only child's play to what is ahead of us. That is how the famous Russian general, Alexander Vasilyevich Suvorov, hardened his soldiers, his Titans. He has left us the maxim: 'Hard in training, easy in battle!' Do you want to fight like Suvorov's men? All who do not: two paces forward—march!"

No one moved. I continued:

"Secondly. You are dissatisfied because, although we have our own field kitchens and you were tired out, you were handed out raw meat, and had to cook your own dinner in your mess tins. There was a purpose in this, too. Do you think that at the front you will always have a field kitchen within reach? Of course not! During an action, the field kitchens may get cut off or lag behind. There will be days when you will go hungry! Do you all hear? You will go hungry, you will have nothing to smoke! I can promise you that! Such is war, such is the life of the soldier. One day—a full belly; next day, an empty one. But you'll have to grin and bear it—and do not forget your honour as soldiers! Keep your chins up! Everyone of you must learn to cook. You're no soldier if you can't cook a meal for yourself. I know that some of you have never done any cooking. I know that many of you used to go to a restaurant every evening and shout: 'Hey, there, waiter! A Hamburger and a pint of beer, please!' And now, suddenly, instead of a steak and beer there's a thirty-mile route march with a seventy-pound pack on your back, and on top of it all you have to cook your own suppers. And while you were cooking them, you hated me, didn't you?"

Voices came from the ranks:

"That's true, Comrade Battalion Commander! That's true!"

I had made contact with the men, set a current flowing between us. I understood them, they understood me—their battalion commander.

4

We set out on our way back.

There was a good metalled road leading to our camp in Talgar, a road that made marching easy.

Easy? If so, then to hell with the road! Will there be metalled roads to march along at the front?

I ordered the battalion to march a hundred yards or so off the road. Whatever the going—stones, ditches, sand—they were to keep straight ahead.

There was not a breeze stirring and the sun beat mercilessly down. The air seemed to move in waves, as it sometimes does. Transparent currents flowed up from earth, as hot as an oven.

I knew it was difficult for the men.... And I knew more—the war demanded it, it was necessary for victory.

On a sun-baked slope we passed through a tobacco plantation, the men marching along paths between the fields. The tobacco, a coarse Kazakh variety, was more than the height of a man. Not the faintest breeze moved the wide, aromatic, sun-parched leaves.

The men marched on and then, suddenly, when they were half-way through the plantation, they began to drop.

What could be the matter? One dropped to the ground, a second, ten of them.... I was afraid. It was as though a frightful epidemic had overtaken us with lightning-like rapidity. The men dropped without a groan and lay like dead.

We unloaded the waggons as quickly as we could, took off the machine-guns, mortars and boxes of ammunition, and took the affected men on to a height beside an irrigation ditch. Away from the fumes evaporated from the tobacco plants they quickly recovered.

It was no longer a battalion, the companies had lost formation. Men were sitting or lying on the ground, bathing their heads with water; some of them were sick.

I saw our medical officer, kind-hearted, blue-eyed old Kireyev, fussing about amongst them, giving them powders to take. Political Officer Boszhanov was helping him. Boszhanov had got hold of a bucket, drawn water from the ditch and was going round with the doctor giving water to those lying on the ground.

When I approached nobody in that group stood up.

"Stand up!" I ordered.

Only a few of them obeyed my order. Kurbatov, groaning, got up.

"Is that you, Kurbatov?"

"Ooh, it's me, Comrade Battalion Commander...."

Could that be the man that I had been so proud to show off before the others? He'd caught it pretty badly!

"What are you looking so sour about? Is that the way to stand in front of your C.O.?"

Kurbatov made an effort, straightened himself up, thrust out his chest and, in general, stood to attention like a soldier.

I went over to another.

"Why don't you get up? Stand up? Where's your rifle?"

"Ooh, Comrade Battalion Commander.... I don't know, Comrade Battalion Commander...."

"What are you standing there for? Report to me immediately with your rifle!"

"How can I find it? How can I go...."

"Do as you're told!"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander.... I've lost my glasses...."

Ah, Murin! A spare pair of glasses appeared on his long nose. Murin hobbled away to look for his rifle.

I ordered the company commanders to fall their companies in on the road to continue the march.

A quarter of an hour later they were fallen in. I rode over to the battalion. What a mess they looked! Their heads were drooping, their eyes dull, many were leaning on their rifles like old men on a walking-stick.

"Battalion! Atten-tion! Slope arms! By the right, quick march!"

The companies moved off. The men just dragged along, out of step, out of dressing, some limping and hobbling along. We wouldn't get far like that!

I rode past the column to the head.

"Battalion—halt!"

Then I made an announcement to the battalion.

"You will do a parade march from here to that tree, and until you *do* do it, we shan't leave here. Number One Company, right dress!"

Do you know what a parade march is? It's goose-stepping, it's a parade on Red Square. The men all raise their legs, stiff, together, and bang them down hard on the flat of the foot.

It was about two hundred yards to the tree.

The first company marched off.

"No good! As you were! Back and start again!"

The company returned and set off again.

"No good again! As you were! Back and start again."

I was furious and so were they.

They marched the third time. This time they showed what they could do. They banged their feet down so hard on the surface of the road that there seemed a risk that they might break it.

A minute before I had hated those dispirited men and they were angry with me, but suddenly my heart was filled to overflowing.

"Well done, well done!"

Those words were like a cry of gladness.

"We serve the Soviet Union!" came the answer in unison, one syllable at a time on the left foot.

The soles of their army boots crashed still harder on the road.

Strong and courageous, they marched as they would on parade on Red Square.

In this way all the companies marched past. The second and third also had to be sent back until eventually they, too, marched the two hundred yards as though on parade.

The machine-gun company was the last to march past. The men kept their step. In the middle of the front rank was lanky Murin; he beat his feet on the ground for all he was worth, his right hand was beating time as though to music; his glasses shone in the sun and his face showed real pleasure.

5

Near Talgar we were met by General Panfilov, riding a stocky Urals horse.

On seeing the General, the men and officers braced themselves up. As the companies were ordered to march to attention even those who were most exhausted kept in step, their heads held high: "That's what we're made of!" they seemed to say.

Panfilov smiled. Tiny wrinkles ran from his small eyes over his sunburnt skin, that looked as if it had been grilled. Rising in his stirrups, he shouted:

"Good marching! Thanks, Comrades, for your excellent service!"

"We serve the Soviet Union!"

The roar of voices was so deafening that the General's horse shied. Panfilov involuntarily clutched at his reins, shook his head and laughed.

I joined in the shouting, too. I was not only answering the General. Had anyone, any soldier, any commander, asked me: "Why are you so severe?"—I could have faced them with a clear conscience and returned the same proud answer:"I serve the Soviet Union."

...We got back to barracks on time.

I glanced at the companies drawn up in a square. The men stood there hollow-cheeked, their faces grimy, all the surplus fat gone, caps wet with sweat, their heavy boots covered with dust, rifles at the order. They were worn out; their feet were burning; there was only one thing they wanted just then—to lie down, but they patiently awaited the command: they did not now lean on their rifles as though they were walking-sticks but, meeting their commander's gaze, squared their shoulders.

They were no longer the same men who had lined up here for the first time a week ago, dressed in their everyday clothes. Nor were they the same men who, in their new, badly-adjusted equipment, had started out yesterday at dawn on their first long march. They were now soldiers who had passed their first military test with credit.

"BAD, COMRADE MOMYSH-ULY"

1

I should like to tell you much more about the way we trained for active service; how General Panfilov used to visit the battalion and talk to the men, telling them over and over again: "Victory is forged before the battle."

But ... we'll skip all that.

At last our turn came to do what we were waiting for, what we had learned to shoot for, what we had become soldiers for, for the sake of which a man stands to attention in front of his commander, obeying him unquestioningly—our turn came to fight.

I have told you how we detrained not far from Moscow and occupied a line in the region of Volokolamsk. On October 13 the enemy approached this line—a mechanized, highly-trained, marauding army which had broken through the front far to the west, and was driving on Moscow to make what the Germans believed to be the last spurt of the *Blitzkrieg*.

That day, the 13th, when our scouts first reported that the Germans were just ahead of us, General Panfilov, as you know, came to visit our battalion.

Having drunk two cups of hot, strong tea, he glanced at his watch and said:

"Thank you, Comrade Momysh-Uly.... That'll do.... Now let's take a look at the line."

We went out. Not far away, on the fringe of the forest, a car was waiting for the General. Its rear wheels were tightly bound round with skid chains, the links of which were packed with hard, dirty snow.

There was snow everywhere. Fine sleighing weather had set in. There was a slight frost. The whitish, pale blotch which provided the only hint of the sun's position during the day had now disappeared from the cloudy sky. A few niggardly, yellowish tints lingered on the horizon, but the evening seemed light because of the whiteness of the snow.

In five minutes we were at No. 2 Company's position. Leaping lightly into the trench, Panfilov crawled under the roofing and peered through the loop-holes into the distance, checking up on the field of fire. Picking up a rifle, he took aim to see if the men could shoot comfortably. He asked the men such prosaic questions as: How's the food? Do you get enough tobacco? When answering they looked at him with expectant eyes.

The news brought back by the scouts had spread through the trenches: the Germans were in front of us. Panfilov talked and joked, but their eyes kept an expectant look: they seemed to be waiting for something. They hoped that at this moment the General would have something special to say to them, some form of words which they had only to repeat when the battle began for all their fears of the strength of the enemy to melt away.

After visiting a number of trenches, Panfilov walked along the bank of the dark, unfrozen Rusa. He kept looking down at the ground, as he always did when he was thinking hard.

Company Commander Sevryukov, his closely-cropped grey hair showing from under the cap which he had hastily jammed on his head, came running up to the General. Behind him, keeping strictly at regulation distance, ran a small group of soldiers.

After hearing his report, Panfilov asked:

"And what is this retinue of yours?"

"My runners, Comrade General."

"And do they follow you about like that everywhere?"

"Certainly, Comrade General. Suppose...."

"Good.... Very good.... And your trenches, Comrade Sevryukov, are well built...."

The ex-bookkeeper's face flushed with pleasure.

"I was thinking, Comrade General," he began to say earnestly, "you might want to get the company together and say a few words to them. So the runners are here in case you need them. They work fast, Comrade General. Only give the order, and in ten minutes every man will be here."

Panfilov took out his watch, glanced at it, and thought a moment.

"In ten minutes? Here?"

"Yes, Comrade General."

"Good, very good.... And now tell me, Comrade Sevryukov, how long would it take you to fall your company in over there?"

Turning quickly round, Panfilov pointed to the other side of the Rusa.

"Over there?" Sevryukov repeated questioningly.

"Yes...."

Sevryukov looked at the General's pointing finger, then at the spot in a direct line from his finger. It was still light enough to see clearly—his hand was pointing in the direction of the forest on the opposite bank.

But still Sevryukov asked again:

"On the far side?"

"Yes, yes ... on the far side, Comrade Sevryukov."

Sevryukov looked at the dark, unfrozen water, turned his head towards a spot about a mile away, where a bridge was hidden by a curve in the bank. He took out his handkerchief, blew his nose awkwardly, and then again stared at the water.

Panfilov waited without saying anything.

"I don't know.... I suppose they'd have to wade it, Comrade General? It's over waist-deep there in the middle. The men would get soaked through, Comrade General."

"Why get them soaked through? It's not summer any longer.... Let's fight somehow without getting wet. Well, Comrade Sevryukov, how long would it take?"

"I don't know. It's not a case of minutes this time, Comrade General."

Panfilov turned toward me.

"This is bad, Comrade Momysh-Uly," he said distinctly.

This was the first time General Panfilov had used the expression "this is bad" to me. It had never happened before, nor did it occur again later, during the fighting near Moscow.

"Bad," he repeated. "Why haven't you put up temporary bridges? Why are there no rafts, no boats? You've dug yourselves into the ground—dug yourselves in skilfully, intelligently.... Now you are waiting for the Germans to come for you. And that's where you've made a bad mistake. Suppose it would be to our advantage to forestall the attack? Suppose you yourselves got a chance to go for the Germans? Are you ready for that? The enemy is getting cheeky and is sure of himself—you have to take advantage of that. Yes, Comrade Momysh-Uly, you haven't considered the possibility of that."

He spoke sharply, without his usual gentleness, making no attempt to lessen the harshness of his tone. I stood at attention, red in the face, listening to his reprimand.

2

The General again turned to Sevryukov.

"So, Comrade Sevryukov, it would take you some time to get your men over there? That's bad.... Think it over. And how long would it take you to regroup on a flank?"

"A flank regrouping? On what line, Comrade General?"

Panfilov pointed to the fringe of the forest where battalion headquarters was hidden. That was where we had come from in the car, making a narrow track, now invisible in the dusk, that led across the white surface of the field.

"There's the line for you, Comrade Sevryukov, from the forest to the river-bank.... Your task: to cover the battalion's flank."

Sevryukov thought a bit: "Fifteen to twenty minutes, Comrade General."

Panfilov brightened up.

"Sure you're not day-dreaming? Well, well, now.... Give the orders, Comrade Sevryukov. I'll keep time."

Sevryukov saluted, turned about, and unhurriedly walked over to his runners. For half a minute he scrutinized the scene of operations without saying anything. "What are you waiting for? For God's sake, get a move on!" I called after him with my eyes. And suddenly I heard a hoarse whisper:

"Good man, he's weighing it up."

Panfilov, smiling, whispered that to me. His face had lost its severity. He was watching Sevryukov with interest.

But Sevryukov was already giving his runners their orders. "The machine-gun platoon is to cover the movement, and will leave last..." we heard him say. "Muratov, at the double!"

Panfilov could not help but nod approvingly. The forty-year-old lieutenant, former bookkeeper at the Alma-Ata tobacco factory, obviously pleased him.

Muratov, a small, robust Tatar, was already darting away along the bank, throwing up clods of snow with his boots. Another runner hurried after him, while a third sped in another direction. Belvitsky, a tall, lanky fellow, formerly a student at the Teachers' Training School, sprinted for the forest. He was acting as marker on the line indicated by the General. The thought flashed through my mind: "He's doing it wrong. You can't stand up like that under fire!" But Sevryukov was already gesticulating furiously at him, trying to explain to him that he had to bend down. Belvitsky stopped in bewilderment. Suddenly Sevryukov crouched down himself, and then the other understood.

Now, in the gathering darkness, we could see the first groups of men running towards the forest. I recognized the burly figure of Gulliulin, bent under the weight of his machine-gun. Even then he towered above the others.

The machine-gun platoon deployed and took cover.

Then the rest of the company, barely visible from where we were, went running past them towards the fringe of the woods, their rifles at the ready. And on the white field there appeared a dark, dotted line—a new line of defence.

I felt as if the watch in Panfilov's hand were ticking off the seconds somewhere inside me. And every stroke seemed to say, "Good, good, good!" I was getting quite excited. This was my battalion, the creation of my labours, into which I had put everything I had—the battalion which regulations allowed me to speak of as mine. Suddenly the thought again flashed through my mind: "But would we be able to manoeuvre like that under fire, when bullets are whistling overhead and the air is filled with the crash and thunder of bursting shells? Suppose someone screamed out in panic: 'We're surrounded!' and dashed for the shelter of the forest? Suppose the panic spread and others ran after him?... But, no! Commanders would shoot such a man on the spot. The men themselves would shoot him!" The watch, or was it my heart, hammered away persistently, "Are you sure? Are you sure?" And I replied through my clenched teeth, "Sure, sure, sure!"

The soldiers had already run past us and dropped down not far away, immediately bringing their entrenching tools into play and piling up low parapets of snow in front of them. One by one Sevryukov's runners came back to him.

Then Galliulin's silhouette again stood out against the deepening purple shadows of the field with his machine-gun on his massive shoulders. The machine-gun platoon, which had covered the whole manoeuvre, had now begun to advance, taking its place in the new line, alongside the other platoons of the company. Now all the men—with the exception of one solitary straggler—were in their places. Sevryukov followed him with his eyes, waited until he, too, had dropped down on the snow and then went up to Panfilov:

"Comrade General! The flank regrouping is completed. The defence line indicated by you has been occupied."

Panfilov screwed up his eyes and looked at his watch.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "Eighteen and a half minutes. Excellent, Comrade Sevryukov! Excellent, Comrade Momysh-Uly.... Now I must not leave until I've congratulated the men. Indeed, if we can't beat the Germans with men like that, what are we good for? Who else do we need? Let's have your company here, Comrade Sevryukov...."

Again the runners darted off and, within a short time, doubling up in column of platoons, the company was drawn up near the General. Sevryukov called the men up to attention, dressed the ranks and reported to the General. It was already dark and the faces of the men were lost in the gloom, although the outlines of the company as a whole could be clearly distinguished.

Panfilov was not given to making speeches, usually preferring to talk with the men sitting informally round him. But this time he addressed the company although his remarks were brief, lasting no more than two or three minutes.

He was unable to hide his pleasure and praised the soldiers.

"Speaking as an old soldier, Comrades, I tell you that with such men to back me up I'm ready to face anything," he said in a low voice.

We could not see his face, but we could tell from his voice that he was smiling. Then, after a slight pause, he added, as if talking to himself:

"What is a soldier? A soldier has to obey everyone, stand at attention in front of every officer, carry out orders. He belongs to the 'lower ranks,' as they used to say in the old days. But what is an order without a soldier? It is a thought, a whim of the brain, a dream. And even the best, the wisest order will remain no more than a figment of the imagination, a fantasy, if the soldier is poorly trained. The fighting efficiency of the army, Comrades, is, first of all, the fighting efficiency of the soldier. The soldier is the deciding factor."

I felt that the men were following Panfilov with rapt attention.

"When a company conducts itself as you have just done, and carries out orders as you did, then ... then the Germans will never see Moscow! Thanks, Comrades, for the splendid training you have shown me! Thanks for your service."

The response thundered over the field: "We serve the Soviet Union!"

And then again there was silence.

"Thanks, Comrade Sevryukov," the General said, shaking hands with the Company Commander. "With such eagles I too am an eagle."

In the tense silence everyone heard his last words distinctly. And again you could tell from his voice that Panfilov was smiling.

And the men? Did they smile, too? It happens sometimes, when everything is still, that a smile can be felt in the darkness.

But fate was cruel to me that evening. It was my bad luck that after the reprimand, which still tormented me, I had lost that wonderful feeling of unity with the men which I've told you about and which more than once has been a reward to me, has brought me happiness. I could not see the men's faces. Perhaps they were smiling or, perhaps, they were still gloomy and uneasy, still waiting for those magic words from the General which would support them in action, and were unaware that the words had already been spoken.

I could not feel the pulse of the company, could not see their faces. This, too, no less than the reprimand, was punishment for some capital mistake. What was that mistake?

I mentally repeated to myself the General's harsh words: "I don't see even a suggestion of this," he had said, when he had shaded the arrow showing where a blow should be struck at the enemy. Suggestion of what! Yes, there was something I had not thought out to the end, something I had left undone. And not only as regards the location of the mine fields, and the question of crossing the river, but also as regards the spirit of the men. But what, what? Ah, victory, one victory in battle—that was what we needed!

I saw the General to his car.

"Pay more attention to your reconnaissance work," he said, stepping on to the running-board. "And don't be afraid to send the men out. There's no point in keeping them squatting all hunched up in the trenches. Let them take a look at the Germans before the fight!"

He took my hand when he said good-bye, and holding it in his own, he went on:

"Do you know what the battalion lacks, Comrade Momysh-Uly? Just one stab at the Germans!"

I started. That was exactly what I myself longed for so ardently.

"Then, Comrade Momysh-Uly, it will not be a battalion.... No! It will be a 'bulat'! Do you know what a 'bulat' is? A blade with a chased design which no one in the world can efface. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, *aksakal*...."

I myself don't know how that word escaped from my lips. I had called Panfilov what Boszhanov had called me, what we Kazakhs say when speaking to the eldest in the clan, to the father.

I felt him squeeze my hand.

"Don't wait, but watch your chance. And as soon as it comes—strike! Plan and strike! Think it over, Comrade Momysh-Uly."

And leaning closer to me so as to see me better in the dusk, he repeated, "You understand me, don't you?"

"Yes, Comrade General."

Panfilov shook my hand with both of his, in the Kazakh manner. It was a caress.

The door of the car slammed and the car, with dimmed lights, moved off over the snow. For a few moments I stood there, following it with my eyes.

3

We drew up a plan that night and Rakhimov, with his usual acumen, plotted it on paper.

At dawn three sections, one from each rifle company, went off reconnoitring along different roads. Then, at two-hour intervals, according to our plan, one section after another crossed the river and made their way into country through which the Germans were already advancing. They were given definite instructions to see some real, flesh-and-blood Germans, just look at them and nothing more, and then return.

I wanted to convince them that we were not up against scaly monsters with tails, or wood goblins or dragons snorting fire—but just ordinary human beings, human beings with perverted, criminal minds, but made of flesh and blood just as we were, whose bodies could be easily pierced with a bayonet or a bullet—creatures that it was quite possible to kill.

Hugging the fringe of the woods the men crept cautiously towards the villages, quietly calling out to the collective farmers, and gathering information about the strength and whereabouts of the enemy. After that they stole up closer to take a look at the Germans themselves. At first they were desperately afraid, but they kept grimly on, peering out from behind bushes and fences, taking cover in pits, fields of stubble and gardens to see what they were like, these men who were coming to kill us.

One after another the sections returned. And one after another they related how the Germans sauntered down the village streets, washed, ate, took pot-shots at the chickens, laughed, and jabbered away in German.

Rakhimov closely questioned the section commanders, taking careful notes of the number, arms and movements of the enemy. And while listening to these reports, I studied the faces of the men, felt the pulse of the battalion, as it were. Many returned in very high spirits, but in some of the men there still lingered signs of depression—they were still afraid.

One section, commanded by Kurbatov, came back in an especially elated mood.

Briskly clicking his heels and saluting smartly, Kurbatcv looked at me with his laughing black eyes and said:

"Permit me to report, Comrade Battalion Commander. Your orders have not been carried out."

"How was that?"

"You ordered us not to shoot, but my finger was simply itching to press the trigger, I fired twice.... And Private Garkusha, too."

"And what happened?"

"Laid out a couple of them, Comrade Battalion Commander. They just made me wild—they were taking a pig away from an old woman.... She was lying on the ground holding on to one of the men, and screaming. He kicked her in the face. I couldn't stand it any longer. I just let fly. And Garkusha did the same.... They went down like ninepins!"

Garkusha—that was the man who had had so much trouble with a bag of bombs on our first route march. He had a word to say as well.

"I had another reason, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"What was that?"

Garkusha looked round at his comrades and winked:

"It isn't enough for a Russian to see, he likes to feel as well!"

"Well did you feel 'em? Do our bullets get them?"

"That's not enough, Comrade Commander. I want to feel them another way."

And Garkusha let fall a remark that won't bear printing.

The men standing round burst out laughing and I listened to it, satisfied.

Shortly afterwards the three machine-gunners came up—placid Blokha, Galliulin and Murin.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, may we ask you a question?" Blokha said.

I gave permission. Blokha nudged Galliulin with his elbow and Murin poked him from behind. The gaunt, dark-faced Kazakh with the sparkling eyes began nervously:

"Comrade Battalion Commander. . . ."

"What is it you want?" I asked.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, you're not angry with us, are you?. . ."

"Why should I be?"

"Because it's like this, Comrade Battalion Commander, why are all the others going out to have a look at the Germans, and only us machine-gunners staying behind? Everyone's seen them except us. . . . Garkusha has even shot one of them, but we haven't even. . . ."

"How can I send you with a machine-gun? We need the machine-guns here."

"But only a little way, Comrade Battalion Commander. . . . Only a little way. . . . And we'll come straight back."

Then Murin suddenly blurted out:

"Comrade Battalion Commander, let us go just for one night. We'll get a look at them during the night. We'll fire one of their billets and they'll come pelting out. And allow us to shoot."

Yes, there was a definite change in the battalion that day.

Murin was an unusual man. I had noticed several times that he was the first to become depressed when the battalion was in a gloomy mood, and the first to brighten up when their spirits rose again. The fighting spirit of the battalion—a spirit at times indistinct, at times clearly defined—always showed itself first in him. But this spirit was still not like the design on the "bulat" blade, which nothing in the world could efface.

It was Panfilov, as you know, who had told me about the "bulat." And the more I thought of his last instructions, the more closely I watched the men and listened to the reports of the scouts, their words and tone, the clearer did a certain idea become.

And so I said to the machine-gunners:

"Very well, Galliulin. I won't leave you out any longer. There'll be work for you tomorrow."

TRY, IF YOU DARE!

1

This was my plan.

About fourteen miles ahead of us was the large village of Sereda, the place where Rakhimov and his mounted patrol had discovered the Germans on October 13. From Sereda highways radiated to Volokolamsk, Kalinin and Mozhaisk.

By analyzing the reports of our scouting parties and conversations with civilian refugees I learned that the enemy had organized an advanced base in Sereda. Here he had dumps with supplies of ammunition, food and fuel and here the advancing German units halted for the night, both those moving north, towards Kalinin, and those heading south, along the Mozhaisk road, encircling our defences from two sides.

It occurred to me that it would be better to strike at this point ourselves, instead of waiting for the Germans to strike. Why not make a night raid on Sereda?

But Panfilov always said: "Think it out! Think it out first, and then strike!"

I sent out an officers' patrol headed by Rakhimov to reconnoitre the ground. Rakhimov, a thirty-two-year-old Kazakh, was a born athlete. I think I told you that at home he had won quite a reputation as a mountain climber. He walked quickly, but effortlessly. Besides being cool-headed and unusually punctilious in carrying out orders he possessed another quality which is invaluable in war—the gift of being able to find his bearings. He seemed to see even in the dark, like a cat.

I waited impatiently for Rakhimov's return. He had left just before dusk on October 14 and had been away all night and all the morning.

When he eventually turned up, at noon, he confirmed everything. The Germans definitely used Sereda as an advanced base, and dumped their stores there. The defences were weak. The Germans apparently felt confident that no one would dare to attack them.

I decided to attack that very night.

By evening an assault party of a hundred men was formed, one or two men from each section. I picked the best of them, the most courageous, the most enduring and most honest. The right to take part in the raid was regarded as an award.

I outlined the task as follows: to break into Sereda from three sides in the dead of night, wipe out the Germans there, burn down their warehouses, take prisoners and, if time permitted, mine the roads leading to and from the village. There was no point in hanging on there and by morning they were to be back in the battalion lines.

The regimental commander gave his sanction, but would not allow me to go with the raiding party. I appointed Rakhimov commander of the detachment, and Boszhanov political officer.

As soon as it grew dark, the hundred men formed up on the outskirts of the forest near the headquarters dug-out. Galliulin's head stood out above the undulating line of caps, and alongside of him, I guessed, was stocky Blokha. I had kept my promise: the machine-gunners were also going on the raid with their guns in carts.

Again I could not see the men's faces, but this time I could sense their mood in the dark. I felt a shiver run through my body, and although I did not go up to the men, I knew that they were gripped by the same nervous excitement. It was a tremor caused not by fear but by the spirit of adventure; the excitement of anticipation before a fight. An ancient Kazakh saying came to my mind, one which Boszhanov had quoted to me not long before. I repeated it to the detachment:

"The enemy is only terrible so long as you have not tasted his blood. Go, Comrades. Find out what the Germans are made of. Will our bullets make them bleed? Will they shriek when we stab them with our bayonets? Will they gnaw at the soil in their death agonies? Let them gnaw—stuff their mouths with our soil! General Panfilov called you eagles! Go, my eagles!"

Rakhimov set off with the raiding party. As I watched the column vanish into the dusk, Krayev came up to me.

"Why wouldn't you let me go, Comrade Battalion Commander?" he muttered.

"I wasn't allowed to go either, Krayev."

That evening we both envied the men.

The night of the 15th set in, the night of our first engagement.

2

I could not sleep that night, nor could I sit in the dug-out. I strolled over to the woods—wandering aimlessly on and off the path, and looked towards the west, in the direction taken by the raiding party—with my ears pricked, as though the sound of shooting could reach me from a distance of fourteen miles.

During the day the dull rumble of a bombardment had reached us from the south. We still did not know that on that day, October 15, the Germans had hurled their tank columns into a drive on Moscow, outflanking the division on our left, and that there, at the Bulychevo State Farm—write down that name, some time in the future it will be written in letters of gold on a marble tablet in the club-rooms of our Division—Panfilov's men had gone into action.

But there, in the south, too, all was quiet that night.

A sentry was on duty on the well-trodden path which led to headquarters and now stood out darkly against the snow. He was looking in the same direction as I. The entire battalion knew that a hundred brave men had gone into action, and the whole battalion waited: how would it turn out, this first skirmish with the Germans?

I repeatedly took out my watch. Its luminous hands moved slowly round: 3.—3.30—4.... As before, my eyes saw nothing but the all-pervading gloom; my alert ear did not catch a sound.

Suddenly something flashed faintly in the sky. No, it was my imagination.... But again there appeared a barely noticeable, cloudy strip of light.... What was it? Was dawn breaking? But could the sun rise in the West? Or was it merely a trick of the mind? Then suddenly I caught sight of another reflection... and again it went out, only to appear once more. Now it glowed continuously, spreading and contracting by turns, but no longer vanishing altogether. Then it took on a rosy hue.... I gazed as if spellbound. A live, pulsating glow spread over the night sky, as if fanned by some powerful breath.

The sentry drew a deep breath. "That's our raiders burning 'em out. They're giving 'em what for!"

I wanted to respond, but I could get no words out. There was a lump in my throat from the sheer joy; my blood pulsed and throbbed in me like the glow in the sky and was carried to every part of my body. At that moment I first knew the fierce joy of a blow struck home.

3

The raiders returned home in the morning.

At the head of the column raced a three-horse team harnessed to a wide, carpet-covered sledge. I hadn't seen those horses in the regiment before, they had captured them from the Germans. Two motor cycles with machine-guns in side-cars were tied behind the sledge with strong ropes—these were also part of the booty. My soldiers were sitting on the saddles, on the luggage carriers and in the side-cars of the motor cycles.

Behind this first sledge came others. The men had left on foot and had returned home in sledges.

Men came running from all the dug-outs, far and near. As they enthusiastically welcomed their own men, they stared with surprise and curiosity at the pitiful figure of a German prisoner also included amongst the booty. In a field-grey uniform with a forage-cap to match he was sitting on a cart looking sullenly round him, slowly twisting his head from side to side on his scraggy neck with its prominent Adam's apple.

"You can talk to him," Boszhanov said. "He knows some Russian. What's your name?"

The prisoner mumbled something.

"Louder!" Boszhanov thundered.

The German sprang to attention, and standing in front of the Kazakh with his arms stretched rigidly at his sides clearly pronounced his name. The men stared with fascination at this real, live, talking German.

"Married?"

"No, I am . . . how do you say? . . . a cavalier. . . ."

Boszhanov laughed heartily. His good-natured, plump face seemed to expand and puff out until his small eyes vanished completely. Everyone joined in the laughter.

"Cavalier! A fine sort of cavalier!" And the German kept looking from right to left.

"Quiet!" someone shouted. "Let's hear what the Political Officer has to say. . . ."

Boszhanov raised his hand, "The Political Officer says: 'Go ahead and laugh!' "

And he added—quite unpremeditatedly—an aphorism which became a favourite saying in the battalion:

"Laughter is the most serious thing at the front."

Speaking slowly and distinctly, Boszhanov began to question the prisoner about the plans of the German command. The man did not understand at once. Finally, catching the essence of the question, he said in broken Russian:

"Breakfast—Volokolamsk; supper—Moscow."

He spoke quite seriously, his arms still held stiffly at his sides. Apparently even now, a prisoner of war, he did not doubt for a moment that this would really happen: "Breakfast—Volokolamsk; supper—Moscow."

And again there was a roar of laughter.

In these minutes of unrestrained laughter I felt that the men were getting rid of their fear. Craning his neck, the prisoner peered round sidewise. He couldn't understand what had got those Russians. We probably couldn't have said ourselves why we found it so funny.

That was how we won our first battle. That was how General Fear was defeated on our sector of the front.

4

Rakhimov and Boszhanov reported the details of the raid.

Of course, as you may guess, things had not turned out altogether according to plan.

One group, which happened to run into a patrol, opened fire before the village was completely surrounded. The men burst into the houses and stabbed and shot the Germans inside. But a number of outlets had remained in the hands of the enemy and many succeeded in getting away. They recovered from their surprise and managed to organize a system of defence sooner than we had anticipated.

The detachment wiped out about two hundred fascists, mined the roads, set fire to a large quantity of motor vehicles, several dumps, one of them a petrol dump, but at one end of the village the Germans succeeded in saving a few odds and ends from destruction.

However, the main thing had been achieved, the men had seen the Germans run, had heard them scream as they killed them, had pierced the enemy's hide with bullets and bayonets.

I walked along our trenches with Rakhimov and Boszhanov. The men who had taken part in the raid had already dispersed and gone back to their respective platoons. I gave the order for a two hours' break. Everywhere you could see groups gathered around the heroes of the raid, the men who had had a cut at the Germans.

Here and there roars of laughter could be heard. That day, the sixteenth of October, nineteen hundred and forty one, was a day of laughter in our battalion. Later on I often recalled those words of Boszhanov's. "Laughter is the most serious thing at the front." When laughter comes to the battlefield, to the front line, the fear flies away.

When I approached someone would shout: "Attention!" You can often tell a soldier's mood by the tone of this one order. How gay it sounded that day!

I went up to a group of which Garkusha was the centre and noticed that one of the men was trying to hide something behind his back. Garkusha caught my glance.

"Give it here!" he said imperatively.

The other soldier handed him a German water-bottle.

"There's rum in it, Comrade Battalion Commander!" announced Garkusha. "Even if it is German, it's all right, it's got a kick.... I'm giving them an object-lesson at the moment, let 'em learn from facts. Try it, Comrade Battalion Commander!"

He held the flask out to me. I took a sip.

"Garkusha fought well," said Rakhimov, laconically.

"If I, Comrade Battalion Commander," continued Garkusha, boastfully, gesticulating with the water-bottle, "had taken one of these from every man I killed I'd have had a couple of dozen. More even, I couldn't have carried 'em. But I didn't have time...."

Garkusha kept on and on, his yarns were endless.

We continued our way along the line of trenches. We ran into Murin who had taken part in the raid with the machine-gun squad. He was hurrying off somewhere but at some distance away he drew himself up in a soldierly way and began to step out. This was the front line; nothing separated us from the Germans except the strip called "no-man's-land," but Murin, passing his Battalion Commander, marched to attention. Looking at me, Murin suddenly smiled. And I smiled at him in return. That was all. We did not stop, did not speak, but again my heart was filled with gladness, as it had been during the night. I loved the man and felt that he loved me too. These were new, wonderful moments of happiness, of the happiness such as only a commander can know, when he feels himself one with his men. I realized with both my heart and brain that fearlessness had been born in the battalion that day.

All round everything seemed to be the same. The horizon gleamed white beyond the dark, unfrozen river. Ridges of ploughed land stuck up here and there through the early snow. The patches of forest made dark shadows. I knew, as before, that at any moment everything might begin to quake, tanks might come lumbering over the snow, leaving black tracks behind them, men in field-grey with tommy-guns, intent upon killing us, might come running out of the forest, dropping to the ground and then jumping up again and running on. But inside me I heard a voice, "Come and try, if you dare!" And in the glances, smiles and words of the men, in the laughter which now never left them, rang the same tacit challenge, "Try if you dare!"

That was how our battalion, our "bulat," sounded that day. It pleases me to describe it in this high-sounding way. Yes, our battalion had become a genuine "bulat," a Damascus blade, tempered, elaborately chased, which would cut through iron and from which nothing in the world could efface the chased design. In simpler words the battalion had completed its education that day. The last act in its schooling had been the blow, or, as a soldier would say, the bayonet thrust—not at a dummy but at the living body of an enemy. That test, which had freed us of fear, we had passed comparatively easily in that daring night attack.

Gruelling battles, terrible tests of courage lay ahead. The great two-months' battle of Moscow had only just begun.

During those two months we, the 1st Battalion of the Talgar Regiment, went into action thirty-five times. At one time we were General Panfilov's reserve battalion; we went into action, as reserves do, at moments of desperate crisis. We fought at Volokolamsk, at Istra, at Kryukovo; we fought the Germans and drove them before us.

I shall tell you about those thirty-five battles another time. But now....

"Now," said Baurjan Momysh-Uly, "you can put a full-stop. Write: End of Part One."

Part Two

ON THE EVE OF BATTLE

It isn't easy for a man to become a soldier, nor for a commander to instil discipline into his men. But it is even harder to fight. "The part of the story we are going to tackle now," Baurjan Momysh-Uly said, "requires even more careful handling. So far we have been dealing with the training of the soldier. Now we come to the fighting."

1

On October 16, 1941, continued Baurjan Momysh-Uly, I was lying on a camp-bed in my dug-out, about ninety miles from Moscow. I was in command of a battalion.

The sound of gun-fire reached me from the distance; sometimes it increased in fury, at others it died down. It was to our left and seemed to be from 12 to 15 miles away. The Germans were trying to break through the left flank of our Division by a tank attack, as we learned later.

But everything was quiet in my battalion's sector. The enemy was not moving up to our front, which constituted the central zone of the so-called Volokolamsk Fortified Area.

I was lying on my bed, thinking.

My batman, Sinchenko, the only man in the battalion I allowed to grouse at me, was getting on my nerves. First he'd got a bath heated up for me, then announced that dinner was ready....

"Later on. Don't bother me now."

"What's all this: 'don't bother me, don't bother me'? You've not been doing anything the whole day long."

"I'm thinking. Get me? Think-ing!"

"Can anyone really think as much as all that?"

"Quite possible. If you're killed through my stupidity, what will I tell your wife? And you're not the only one I've got to think of."

You, too, are probably thinking that a battalion commander—especially just then, when we might be in action at any moment, really ought to be doing something: talking over the telephone, conferring with his subordinates, going the rounds of his sector, giving orders. But our General, Ivan Vasilyevich Panfilov, had impressed on us over and over again that the main duty and the main job of a commander was to think, think, and think.

2

On the night of the fifteenth, as you already know, a hundred men from my battalion had raided an enemy position some fourteen miles away. They had come back in triumph.

The first success had transformed the morale of the men, had transformed the whole battalion.

But what next?

Our audacity had, of course, made no change in the strategic situation. The seven hundred of us, the 1st Battalion of the Talgar Regiment, were still holding more than five miles of the front on the approaches to Moscow, towards which the German divisions were pressing.

The same thoughts that had been harassing me for the last two or three days continued to obsess me.

When I had taken over the sector it had never even occurred to me, as you know, that here, on this five-mile line, there would be only one battalion to hold out against the enemy. I had felt sure that a second—and perhaps even a third—line of defence would be set up behind us and manned by other Red Army units. I imagined that after parrying the first blow and immobilizing the enemy for a while, we would withdraw to our main forces.

But two or three days before this we had been informed that the Germans had broken through near Vyazma, and were now in front of our sector in strength; that there was no second line of troops behind us, that Volokolamsk and the Volokolamsk Highway, the straightest road to Moscow, was held by our one division stretched along a front many miles in length and supported by a few regiments of anti-tank artillery.

Such was the situation that obtained in that war. Such was the task confronting the Red Army at that moment —using small forces to contain the enemy outside Moscow and hold him until reinforcements arrived.

3

Allow me to avoid the use of such expressions as: our country required ... our country demanded ... I want to be sparing of words when it comes to this matter of love for our native land.

You may be sure that I feel no less keenly than you what our socialist country is, what kind of country it is we are defending, we are living in.

In those days all my love and passion and spiritual ardour were concentrated on one object, on carrying out the task that had fallen to the lot of our battalion, on holding the line.

As I lay there I saw in my mind's eye how in a few hours the enemy would move over the nine or ten miles of undefended no-man's-land that still separated us from the Germans and reach our trenches on the bank of the Rusa. On meeting resistance and discovering the positions of our defences, they would concentrate an assault group somewhere in the woods under cover of night—at a point they would choose themselves—bring up artillery and then, after a preliminary barrage, using their familiar tactics, endeavour to drive a spearhead into a narrow front—of perhaps no more than half a mile. Yet there was no more than a single rifle platoon and a machine-gun section to every thousand yards of our battalion's front.

I had no reserves. Calculating the distances, I realized that the Germans could break through our lines in a headlong thrust before forces from other sectors would be able to reach this unknown point of penetration.

But couldn't I put myself in the place of the commander of the German assault group and, thinking with his mind, pick on the sector that would seem the most favourable for a break-through? The enemy was no fool either, and while I was thinking for him, the scoundrel would be thinking for me.

Naturally, he would guess my line of reasoning easily and find a way to outwit me. He would strike in one place, I would hurry to concentrate the companies, transfer mortars and artillery there, and meanwhile another enemy group would break through the undefended sector of the front.

Perhaps even now, at a distance of twelve miles or so, the enemy was reading my thoughts with a sneer.

I imagined to myself the commander of the German group that was massing against us, the supercilious, smooth-shaven face of the Hitlerite and the colonel's, or perhaps even general's, uniform.

Against our five miles, against my battalion, he had at his command, or would have tomorrow or the next day, something like a division drawn from the rear. Peering intently at the face of this imagined German commander whom I was even then, lying on my bunk, in duty bound to defeat in battle—the silent battle of wits—I tried to penetrate into his mind, to see through his plans, telling myself: don't count on having a fool in front of you, Baurjan.

But the eyes that I seemed to see—the keen, cruel, elderly eyes that could light up with the thrill of battle, that could study a map with interest for hours, did not now gleam with intelligence. He, this German colonel or general, despised me, had nothing but contempt for the battalion opposing him, for the few hundred Red Army men who were holding five miles of front on the approaches to Moscow. He was bored. To his way of thinking the war in the East was already won. The road to Moscow was open. He sneered at us, he did not bother to exert his brain on such as us.

But perhaps I was mistaken. Perhaps the lessons of the war—the heroic resistance of the frontier units of the Red Army, the defensive battle around Smolensk, the defence of Odessa and Leningrad—had forced him to take heed. Perhaps even our night raid, our challenge, had shown him that there was fierce fighting ahead on the way to Moscow.

Hardly so.... To him, the conqueror, who in four months had covered hundreds of miles with Hitler's army from the frontier to the Moscow Region, who had commanded a division in the battle at Vyazma where our Central Front had been broken up, to him, who was confident that within a few days he would be driving through the streets and squares of Moscow, viewing them from his car, to him the night attack of a hundred Red Army men probably seemed a spasmodic sally, a guerrilla raid such as would most likely occur quite frequently in the future and with which the Gestapo and the field police would be able to cope.

Intuitively I felt that I had guessed his thought, that I had penetrated his skull. I felt a sudden surge of rage: You despise us, do you? Bored, are you? You just wait, we'll make you think!

And meanwhile....

Meanwhile we would have to reckon on some cut-and-dried routine operation on his part, on the part of the "professional conqueror" who no longer deigned to use his brains. Such operations were already familiar to us. After crossing the ten or twelve miles that were without defences and driving in our outposts.... Here I made a wry face. Although I had penetrated into the enemy's brain box I had not got very far: I had made a circle and got back to where I started.

4

I said that we knew their routine. Was it really so?

What I knew of war I had learned from reading, from textbooks, training manuals, conversations with people who had been in action. I had taken part in exercises, had trained the soldiers and come to the front with them, yet the war still remained a secret to me, as to all who have not been in action themselves.

In Poland and in France the Hitlerites had demonstrated their tactical method; after breaking through the defence line at several points they would push ahead on tanks, trucks and motor cycles, and after that they would crush the resistance of the scattered and surrounded groups. They were trying to operate on the same lines in our country as well.

Even in my thoughts I found myself using such hackneyed expressions as: "disposing of," "breaking through," "crushing."...But what were these things actually? What did "crushing" mean? How did it come about?

Without having to look at the map, which I knew by heart, I saw the winding banks of the narrow, sluggish Rusa, our sector—the chain of machine-gun nests and rifle units. Behind this, in the woods, were hidden the eight guns allotted to the battalion, in front, along the bank, was the sheer anti-tank cliff, called an escarpment in military language.

My glance ran on farther, across the river, in the direction of the enemy. I could see every detail of the intervening zone, not yet occupied by the Hitlerites, but already abandoned by our forces. I saw the roads leading from the points of German concentration to our trenches. I saw the ravines and the forest, which were ideal for ambushes. My heart ached when I imagined how the German columns, meeting with no resistance, would move straight past those ravines and those woods which today we were still able to reach, and in which whole companies could be concealed.

I thought of a blow from the rear, a blow from ambush, in the rear of the undeployed columns, which would thus be caught between two fires.

The idea of a counter-attack occurred to me, of a sudden assault on the enemy while he was advancing. But with what forces could we attack? Should I lead the battalion out of its fortifications?

The last time General Panfilov had visited our lines he had persistently directed my attention to the possibility of a counter-blow, given the opportunity.

But I had only seven hundred men stretched along a five-mile front. I simply could not move the whole battalion and leave the sector undefended. How can I possibly convey to you this despair a commander feels when he knows that his forces are insufficient. . . .

Thinking for the enemy, I saw many ways in which he could effect a break-through in the line of my battalion.

But I myself could not think of a plan, could not see how to avert a breach in our sector.

I tortured myself to the point of exhaustion. My whole body ached as if I had been beaten black and blue.

5

In the evening I received orders to report at the command post of the battalion on our immediate left at five next morning.

ONE HOUR WITH PANFILOV

1

I set out on horseback for my neighbour on the left.

Don't forget to say, on the left. I want you to have a clear, if only rough, idea of the disposition of our forces. Picture to yourself again the line of the battalion drawn up along the bank of the Rusa. Stand with your face to the enemy. As I go on, you must be quite clear that such and such an action is taking place in front of you, in front of the line held by the battalion; that such and such an action is taking place on your right, and such and such an action on your left, where battalions like ours are holding sectors similar to ours.

Winter had set in unusually early; it was amazing weather for October. There had been a week or two during which there had been enough snow for good sleighing, and then the weather changed. The frosts ceased and the autumn slush came back. The nights were dark and moonless.

Afraid of taking a sudden header into a hole with my horse, I did not go straight along the bank, but by a roundabout route, following the village road.

It was hard going for Lysanka, even at a walk. Tossing her head, she dragged her hoofs out of the squelchy mud with a plop-plop. I sat slumped in the saddle, thinking over my problem.

As I rode on I began to overtake men walking in the same direction. I sat up with a start. Who were they? Were these new troops? Reinforcements? From time to time I flashed my electric torch on them.

Who were they? Were they stragglers from some column? They were walking in two's and three's, groundsheets over their shoulders to protect them from the drizzling rain. The muzzles of their rifles, which they carried slung, jutted out. Someone asked me:

"How far to Sipunovo, Comrade Commander?"

I asked him who the men were and where they were coming from. He told me that a reserve battalion had marched along this way that night from Volokolamsk and that they had fallen behind.

Someone else asked me how far it was to Sipunovo. I answered and passed on. For some time the road was deserted. There was complete silence around me. The sound of the distant bombardment had died down during the night.

Then again I saw someone ahead of me dragging his feet through the sucking mud. There were more men walking along in two's and three's. I was glad of the reinforcements, but... but, devil take it, they certainly marched badly. You could feel the lack of the sort of training Panfilov had given us. Our men did not straggle or lag behind.

Lysanka suddenly shied. A lantern showed me a cart stuck in the mud up to its wheel hubs, a fallen horse and a driver soaked to the skin.

A minute later I saw glowing cigarette ends on the side of the road. A few men were lying by the roadside, smoking; they were exhausted and their aching bodies did not feel the wet.

From all sides I was bombarded with the one question: How far is it to Sipunovo?

I was riding in the same direction. The command post of the battalion adjoining ours was located in the forest near the village of Sipunovo.

2

I reached the command post and walked down the wet steps into the headquarters dug-out.

"Ah, Comrade Momysh-Uly, come along in. . . ." I heard a familiar husky voice and saw General Ivan Vasilyevich Panfilov.

He was sitting beside the stove, taking off his boots. One was already off and he was holding out his small dark-skinned foot towards the red-hot stove. Panfilov's aide-de-camp, a young, fresh-complexioned lieutenant, sat nearby. In another corner sat a captain whom I did not know.

I sprang to attention and reported. Panfilov took out his watch and glanced at it.

"Take your things off and come and sit down by the fire."

He spread out his foot-cloth, which was damp at one end, stepped on the dry end, quickly and skilfully wrapped up his foot, and drew on his boot.

His soaking wet great-coat with the modest khaki stars was drying near the stove. Apparently he had been receiving the newly-arrived unit, making the rounds of the sector, and had been out in the rain for a long time. Most likely he had not slept all night. Yet there was not a trace of fatigue in his wrinkled, fifty-year-old, swarthy face with its neat, black moustache.

"I suppose you heard us today, eh, Comrade Momysh-Uly?" he asked, screwing up his eyes and smiling.

It was indescribably pleasant at that moment to hear his calm, friendly voice and to see his sly look. I suddenly felt that I was not on my own, that I had not been left to face alone an enemy who knew some secret of war, which I, who had never been in action, did not know. I felt that our General also knew this secret, he had been in the last world war as a soldier and after the revolution had commanded in succession battalion, regiment and division.

"We repulsed them," Panfilov continued, and then whistled jokingly, "phew-w-w... but I was scared all right! Only don't tell anyone, Comrade Momysh-Uly! The tanks broke through.... This chap," he said, pointing to his aide, "was over there with me and he saw a thing or two. You tell him how we tackled them."

The aide sprang to his feet.

"We met them head-on, Comrade General," he said eagerly.

Panfilov raised his black, slanting eyebrows with displeasure.

"Head-on?" he repeated. "No, sir. It's easy to pierce a head with any sharp object, to say nothing of a bullet. 'Head-on' is just nonsense. Trust a company to such a dumb-bell in uniform and he actually will lead them head-on against tanks. We didn't butt them with our heads, we met them with fire! With guns! Didn't you see?"

The aide hastened to agree, but Panfilov repeated acidly:

"Head-on.... Go out and see whether they're feeding the horses.... Tell them to saddle up in half an hour."

The aide saluted and went out crestfallen.

"He's still young!" said Panfilov gently.

Drumming on the table with his finger-tips, he glanced first at me and then at the unknown captain.

"You can't fight with the infantry's heads," he repeated. "Especially now, Comrades. We haven't got too many men here at Moscow. We must take care of our soldiers."

I listened to the General closely, trying to find in what he said the answer to the question that was torturing me. But so far I found nothing.

After a slight pause he added:

"We have to take care of them not in words, but by action, by means of fire."

3

"You have a new neighbour, Comrade Momysh-Uly. This is Captain Shilov."

The captain was standing near the table. He was tall, well-built and young for his rank, about twenty-seven by his looks. He was not wearing the fur cap with earflaps worn by the commanders and men of Panfilov's Division, but a khaki cap with the red band of the infantry. He had not spoken a word, but this habit of keeping silent until addressed by his superior officer, taken with his uniform and bearing, showed that he was an officer of the regular army. We exchanged greetings.

"Did you come along the road, Comrade Momysh-Uly?" asked Panfilov.

"Yes, Comrade General."

"Many stragglers?"

"Quite a lot," I said.

"Hm! . . ." Panfilov expressed his annoyance.

He turned to the captain. Shilov flushed and stood to attention. But instead of reprimanding him, Panfilov said:

"I know what you're thinking of, Captain, I know. Somebody trained them, somebody drilled them, and now, you, Captain Shilov, must pay for it. Isn't that so?"

Panfilov smiled and so did Shilov. The tenseness left him.

"No, Comrade Major-General, it wasn't that."

"Not that?"

The General turned briskly towards him, his small eyes gleaming with curiosity.

"I wasn't thinking of myself, Comrade Major-General," Shilov went on in a steady voice. "I'm afraid it's the men who'll have to do the paying later. Permit me to leave and do something about it, Comrade Major-General."

"What's that, make it hot for the stragglers?"

"No, Comrade Major-General, make it hot for the officers and I'll find out which of them deserves a double dose."

Panfilov laughed.

"Fine, fine, Captain!"

"May I go?"

"Wait a while."

After a moment's thought Panfilov repeated:

"So now, Comrade Momysh-Uly, you have a new neighbour. It's a weakish battalion. Badly trained. That's right, isn't it, Captain?"

"Yes, Comrade Major-General."

Panfilov explained to me that a reserve battalion stationed in Volokolamsk had been attached to the Division. Captain Shilov had taken over command only a few days ago.

"The old commander had to be removed," said Panfilov. "He spoiled the men, was sorry for them. Idiot! Sparing them means not sparing them! You get my meaning, Captain?"

"Yes. I know that, Comrade Major-General."

For a few seconds Panfilov stared in silence at Captain Shilov's serious young face. Then he turned to me.

"As for you, Comrade Momysh-Uly, I sent for you because. . . ."

I was all attention.... But he only said that Captain Shilov and I would have to inspect the junction and gap between our two battalions together.

"If the enemy wedges into the junction, smash him between you. Make your preparations for that. Agree on all questions of communications and combined action on the spot. Don't leave one another in the lurch."

After another searching glance at the captain, he gave him permission to leave.

But I was still bothered by the same old unanswered questions. "Smash him between you!" How? With what forces? Should I take the men out of the trenches? Lay the front bare? And what if the enemy should attack simultaneously at another point as well? "Smash him between you!" But then the enemy would be smashing at us, too, with superior forces, at different points and from various directions.

I grasped at every one of Panfilov's words but realized that the secret of battle, the secret of victory, was as much a mystery to me as ever.

4

The door closed behind the captain.

"Strikes me he has a head of gold," said Panfilov thoughtfully. "But.... So you say there were lots of stragglers, Comrade Momysh-Uly? Very many?"

"A great many, Comrade General."

"Ekh, even with a head of gold you're in a pretty poor way if the troops aren't properly trained."

For an instant Panfilov looked tired, depressed. But the next instant he glanced at me and smiled. His little eyes in their fine network of wrinkles sparkled merrily.

"Well, Comrade Momysh-Uly, let's hear what you have to say...."

I reported briefly on our successful night raid. But Panfilov kept questioning me, getting at the details. Once again, as had been the case several times before, it was more of a conversation than a report.

"Do you know what, Comrade Momysh-Uly?" Panfilov said. "You tell Shilov about this. Buck him up.... I want him to punch out in your style himself tomorrow."

The General did not congratulate me, did not shake my hand or say, "Well done!" He praised me in another way, more tersely.

"And so, Comrade Momysh-Uly," he continued, "you've learned how to thrash the Germans."

"No, Comrade General, I haven't learned," I answered wryly.

He raised his eyebrows.

"How's that?"

"Today, Comrade General, I've been racking my brains the whole day long. When I put myself in the enemy's shoes, I win easily. But when I try to work it out for myself I can't see how to defeat him, how to hurl him back."

Frowning, Panfilov stared at me in silence for some time. Then he ordered:

"Report in detail! Take out your map!"

5

I spread the map out on the table. Our line, sketched in with red pencil, was still untouched, still unbroken. On either side of my battalion's sector stretched the defence lines of the neighbouring battalions. These lines represented the loosely-linked chain of one-man bunkers and machine-gun nests which protected Moscow from the enemy.

I reported frankly that after a close consideration of the situation I still did not see how I could avert a breach in my battalion's sector with the forces at my disposal.

It was not easy for me to say this, as any officer will understand, but I said it. Panfilov nodded his head for me to go on, but he said nothing. I told him what was troubling me, told him that I did not have so much as a single platoon in reserve, that in the event of a sudden drive I had nothing with which to bolster up our defences, nothing with which to counter the blow.

"I am confident, Comrade General, that my battalion will not retreat, and if necessary will stand and die on that sector, but—"

"Don't be in such a hurry to die," Panfilov broke in. "Learn how to fight. But go on, Comrade Momysh-Uly, go on."

"Then there's something else bothering me, Comrade General. At this moment there's a ten-mile stretch of no-man's-land between me and the enemy."

I pointed this out on the map. Again Panfilov nodded.

"Well, Comrade General, do we just have to make the enemy a present of those ten miles?"

"What do you mean by 'present'?"

I explained:

"Well, you see, Comrade General, after disposing of our outposts, he will advance quickly. . . ."

"What do you mean by 'disposing of'?"

So far Panfilov had listened seriously and closely to my report. But at this point his face expressed displeasure. He repeated curtly:

"What do you mean by 'disposing of'?"

I did not answer. To me it seemed quite obvious that an outpost which consisted of one or two sections, ten or twenty men in all, could not hold up big enemy forces indefinitely.

"I'm surprised at you, Comrade Momysh-Uly!" the General said. "After all, you did thrash the Germans, didn't you?"

"But, Comrade General, we were the ones to attack then.... Besides, it was at night and we caught them unawares...."

"I'm surprised at you," he repeated. "I thought you understood, Comrade Momysh-Uly, that a soldier mustn't sit still and wait for death. You should bring death to the enemy. Attack. If you don't play with him, you know, he'll play with you."

"But where should we attack, Comrade General? Sereda again? The enemy is on his guard there."

"And what's this?"

Quickly taking up a pencil, Panfilov pointed to the strip of no-man's-land on the map.

"You're right about one thing. If the enemy comes up close our thread won't be able to hold him. But then he has to come up first. You say, 'after disposing of.' ... No, Comrade Momysh-Uly, this strip of no-man's-land is just the place to fight on.... You take the initiative there and attack. Where are your outposts?"

I showed him. Two roads led from the German positions to my battalion's front: a dirt road and a cambered highway. Each of these roads was guarded by an outpost two or three miles in front of our lines. Panfilov frowned disapprovingly.

"What is the strength of your outposts?"

I told him.

"That's not enough, Comrade Momysh-Uly. You ought to have reinforced platoons here. They ought to have more light machine-guns. Heavy machine-guns aren't necessary. The groups should be lightly equipped, mobile. And you ought to be bolder, move them nearer the enemy. Let them meet the enemy with fire, attack as soon as the enemy begins to move."

"But, Comrade General, the Germans will simply outflank them.... They'll stream past them on both sides."

Panfilov smiled.

"You think that where a deer goes there a soldier can go, and where a soldier goes there an army can go, don't you? That wasn't said about the Germans, Comrade Momysh-Uly. Do you know how they fight nowadays? Where a lorry goes, there the army goes. Now then, how are you going to take motor transport over those ravines and pot-holes if the roads are blocked? You just tell me how, Comrade Momysh-Uly."

"In that case, they'll just drive us out. . . ."

"Drive you out? It's not so easy to drive out a platoon that has three or four machine-guns. You have to spread out, to engage them actively. And that, Comrade Momysh-Uly, will take half a day. Let them outflank you, that's not dangerous. But don't let them surround you completely. At the right moment you must get away, slip through. For example, like this. . . ."

With a light touch of his pencil, Panfilov blocked one of the roads near a German-occupied village. Then the pencil ran off to one side and, tracing a loop, returned to the road at another point somewhat nearer the battalion's lines. Glancing at me to see whether I was following him and whether I understood, he made another loop and then repeated it again, each time drawing closer to the battalion's sector.

"You see," he said, "the kind of spiral it is, like a spring. How many times will you force the enemy to attack without getting any results? How many days will you take away from him? Now then, Herr Enemy, what do you say to that?"

I grasped it. After all I had thought along the same lines myself. But before my talk with Panfilov I had been unable to rid myself of my obsession with defence. It had seemed to me that it would be impermissible to take the men out of the trenches.

6

Panfilov's aide came in.

"The horses are saddled, Comrade General."

Panfilov glanced at his watch.

"Good.... Call Headquarters and say we'll be leaving in ten minutes."

He felt the collar and shoulders of his great-coat, which was drying near the stove, crouched down on his haunches, threw a few sticks of wood into the fire and remained there for a minute or so in front of the open door of the stove. Once again, as during our previous meeting, these simple movements conveyed a feeling of confidence. I felt that he had prepared himself to fight thoroughly, with great deliberation and for a long time.

Then he straightened up and turned to the map, twirling his pencil as he stared at it.

"Of course, Comrade Momysh-Uly," he said, "when it comes to the fighting everything may turn out quite differently from the way you and I imagined it just now. It's not pencils that fight, nor the maps drawn by these pencils. It's man who does the fighting."

He spoke as if he were thinking aloud, a typical mannerism of his.

"For your reinforced platoons," he continued, "you must pick brave and intelligent commanders, men with something here."

And he tapped himself on the forehead.

"Shall I select them from the men who took part in the night raid, Comrade General?"

Panfilov frowned.

"I don't intend to take charge of your battalion for you, Comrade Battalion Commander. I have a division. Selecting intermediate positions for your outposts and choosing your commanders is something you'll have to do yourself."

But after a moment's thought, he went on:

"No; why send men who've already been in it? Let the others get a taste of being under fire too. Everyone has to fight. But you must be clear, Comrade Momysh-Uly, about the chief thing: you're not to let the enemy move along the roads, you must prevent him doing this by every means in your power. Don't let him reach your lines. Just now the enemy is ten miles away from you. That's not far when there's no resistance, but it's quite a long way when every bit of woodland, every hillock becomes a point of resistance."

Scanning the map again, he went on:

"There's another thing, Comrade Momysh-Uly. Check up on the battalion's mobility. Keep your eye on the transport. See that the waggons and horses are ready to move at a moment's notice.... In war anything can happen. Be prepared to pack up quickly, to move fast, when you get the order."

It seemed to me that there was something unexpressed behind his words. Why was he telling me all this? Once more I decided to tell him frankly about my misgivings.

"Comrade General, may I ask you a question?"

"By all means, go ahead! That's why we're having this talk."

"I'm not clear, Comrade General. The point is that the enemy is bound to get to the battalion's line eventually. You said yourself we wouldn't be able to hold him. I would like to ask you what the prospect is? What must I, as battalion commander, be prepared for? To withdraw?"

Panfilov drummed on the table with his fingers, a gesture which indicated that he was in something of a quandary.

"What do you think yourself, Comrade Momysh-Uly?"

"I don't know what to think, Comrade General."

"You see, Comrade Momysh-Uly," he said after a moment's hesitation, "a commander must always be prepared for the worst possible eventuality. Our job is to hold the roads. If the Germans break through our troops must be right there on the roads in front of them again. That's why I took a battalion away from here. I wanted to take yours, but you cover an important road."

He pointed on the map to the Sereda-Volokolamsk road, across which was drawn the red line of my battalion.

"It's not the line that is important, Comrade Momysh-Uly, what is important is the road. If necessary, you must take your men out of the trenches boldly, but keep the road in your hands. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Comrade General."

He walked over to his coat, and as he was putting it on he asked:

"Do you know the answer to this riddle? 'What is it that is the longest thing in the world and yet the shortest, the fastest and yet the slowest, something that people waste more than anything else and yet regret most when it is gone?' "

I could not guess right away. Pleased that he had puzzled me, Panfilov took out his watch with a smile and held it up:

"Here it is! Time! Our job now, Comrade Momysh-Uly, is to gain time, to take it away from the enemy. See me off."

We clambered up the steps out of the dug-out.

7

A grey dawn was breaking, the rain had stopped and the shapes of trees loomed vaguely through the fog. An orderly brought the horses. Panfilov looked round.

"Where's Shilov? Let's walk a bit so that he can catch us up."

As we walked along, Panfilov questioned me about what we were doing in our lines. I reported that the battalion was digging communication trenches. Panfilov stopped short.

"What are you digging with?"

"Digging with? Shovels, Comrade General."

"Shovels? You should dig with your heads." He spoke in his usual gentle tone, quizzically. "You've most likely piled up plenty of earth there. What you have to do now, Comrade Momysh-Uly, is to dig dummy positions. You must use your wits, if you want to outwit the enemy."

I was surprised. From our conversation, I had gathered the impression that he did not attach much importance to the defence line. It appeared now that in fact he did.

"Very well, we'll dig dummy positions, Comrade General," I told him.

Captain Shilov overtook us at a run.

Where the path we were following crossed the main road a sentry stood, a young fellow of about twenty, with grey, serious eyes. He presented arms to the General, not very smartly, but with great gusto.

"How's life, soldier?"

The lad was embarrassed. At that time "soldier" was not the accepted form of address in our army. The word "fighter" or "Red Army man" was used. This was probably the first time he had been called a soldier. Noticing his embarrassment, Panfilov said.

"Soldier is a great word. We're all soldiers. Well, tell me, how's life treating you?"

"Fine, Comrade General."

Panfilov looked down. The sentry's heavy boots were plastered with slimy mud. Traces of the mud of the road they had marched along, scraped off with a bit of wood, could still be seen on his wet puttees and even above them. The hand holding the rifle was blue with the early-morning cold.

"Fine?" drawled Panfilov. "And tell me, how did you men manage to march here?"

"Fine, Comrade General."

Panfilov turned to Shilov.

"Captain Shilov, how did the men march?"

"Badly, Comrade General."

"Oh-ho.... So it seems you've been fibbing, soldier," Panfilov said, smiling. "Come now, speak up, speak up, tell me how things are with you."

But the sentry only repeated stubbornly:

"Fine, Comrade General."

"No," said Panfilov. "Do you really think soldiers have a fine time when there's a war on? What's so fine about marching at night in the rain through muck like this? Did you get any sleep after your march? No. Did you have a meal? No. You stand here, drenched to the skin, in the wind, or dig away in the ground, and tomorrow or the day after you'll be going into action, where there'll be casualties. What is there fine in that?"

The sentry smiled awkwardly.

"No, brother," Panfilov continued, "in war time soldiers don't have it fine.... But our fathers and grandfathers were able to stand all that, were able to bear the hardships of a soldier's life, and they smashed the enemy. You haven't met the enemy in battle yet, brother.... But the fight against cold, exhaustion and privation is also a battle that needs courage. And yet you don't get discouraged or whine.... Now that's something fine, soldier! What's your name?"

"Polzunov, Comrade General.... That's just what I wanted to say myself, Comrade General...."

"A famous name. The name of a famous engineer.... What you wanted.... Then why didn't you say so?"

"Sorry, Comrade General, I just didn't think."

"A soldier should always think. A soldier should fight with his head. Well, then, Polzunov.... I'll remember you. I want to hear of you in the days ahead. Understand?"

"I understand, Comrade General."

Panfilov walked on slowly, in silence, looking at the ground under his feet. Then he stopped and turned to Shilov and me.

"A soldier's life is a hard one," he said. "There's no denying it, it's a hard life. You must always tell a soldier that frankly, and if he lies, you must put him right immediately."

He was lost in thought for a while.

"Don't spare your men before a battle, Comrade Shilov, but in action.... Take care of them in action. Take care of them then."

He said this in a strange tone, not like a command. It was more than a command, it was a commandment. Its solemnity sent a shiver down my spine. But in quite a different voice, authoritative, stern, Panfilov immediately repeated:

"Take care of them.... At this moment we have no other forces, no other soldiers here, near Moscow. If we lose these men, we'll have nothing to hold up the Germans with."

He bade us good-bye, seized the reins, leapt into the saddle and trotted off along the edge of the road.

THE BATTLE ON THE ROAD

1

In accordance with Panfilov's instructions Captain Shilov and I visited the sector between our two battalions and examined the ground thoroughly. We came to an agreement about coordinated operations and mutual assistance in case of need.

On leaving Shilov, I made my way back to my headquarters along the river-bank. Strangely enough, after the sleepless night spent in anxious thought, after my conversation with Panfilov, which had been another strain on my nerves, I did not feel at all tired, but as though a load had been lifted from my shoulders. I no longer slumped in my saddle; my thoughts no longer weighed me down. It even seemed as though Lysanka cantered along more lightly.

It was quiet all round. There was no sound of gun-fire, either near or distant. On that day, the seventeenth of October, a lull had set in to the left of us too, where only the day before German tanks had crashed into our defences and fighting had raged.

I remember that silence to this day, remember the slate-grey sky, the squelchy field with the little puddles reflecting the dull light, remember the soil that the men had piled up along the sides of the trenches, the yellowish, clayey soil of the Moscow Region.

I had just been rebuked by Panfilov because of this clay. It gave away our firing positions and must be removed and scattered over the fields. But just then, in the disturbing silence that had fallen, I simply stared at the long ribbons of clayey soil, stared so as never to forget that morning scene.

Across the river I could see a wet black road disappearing into the forest near by. Marked by telegraph poles, the road ran up the embankment, cut across the front held by my battalion, led past the little rain-swept houses of the village, past the squat brick church and on towards the objective of the enemy's assaults—to the Volokolamsk Highway, to Moscow.

Everything I met that morning is indelibly impressed on my memory.

To this day I remember the worried, questioning look a woman gave me as Lysanka trotted through a village stretching along the river-bank. I can still see her elderly face, sun-burned, weather-beaten and toil-worn, with rather faded light-blue eyes, a typical face of a Russian peasant-woman. She seemed to be asking: "Where are you going? What news are you bringing? What is going to happen to us?" She seemed to be pleading: "Just say one word to reassure us."

But Lysanka had already dashed past and I caught sight of a Red Army man with a mess tin in his hand, stooping over a tiny lad. The soldier straightened up, and I recognized the shrewd, good-natured face of machine-gunner Blokha. His gun position was near by. Blokha hastily put on a serious expression, frowning slightly, and saluted. Immediately after him, and with just as serious a face, the little boy saluted too.

There was nothing out of the ordinary in such scenes, you glanced at them casually and the next moment you had forgotten them. But on that morning this little boy, this Tom Thumb, with his instinctive trust in a strange soldier, touched me to the quick.

Then my eye lighted on something else. Standing in a front garden down a side lane, her hands resting on the fence, was a young woman. She was laughing and talking to somebody. Jalmukhamed Boszhanov, the political officer of the machine-gun company, was coming towards her, smiling, from the porch. The eyes of both of them flashed, youth was dominant. Boszhanov was taken aback when he saw me, sprang to attention and saluted smartly. The girl turned towards me as well. Her glance changed in an instant—it was the same worried, questioning look that the woman now left behind had given me.

Again that glance touched me to the quick.

2

After passing the village, I came to Lieutenant Brudny's platoon. Like the others, his men were digging trenches. One of them, stripped to the waist in spite of the cold, was hacking away at the ground with a pick, his brawny, sweating shoulders glistening as if they were polished. It was Kurbatov, second-in-command of the platoon.

"I'm tackling it myself, Comrade Battalion Commander," he said. "It's stony here and I have to lend a hand. It's warming me up, too."

Muscular and strong, he freely exposed his bare chest to the keen October wind. I had often admired this man and been proud of his handsome soldierly appearance. But now I merely said:

"What do you think you're doing, piling up the earth like that? It can be seen for miles round. Spread it about quickly, and level out the whole place! Where's the lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Brudny, agile and slim, was already running towards me, his well-fitting great-coat tightly belted. He reported smartly and without hesitation.

"Let the men finish their work," I said, "and then have the whole place camouflaged. Give orders to that effect, Comrade Lieutenant, and report to me immediately at Battalion Headquarters."

"Very well, Comrade Battalion Commander," he replied in a crisp voice.

Lieutenant Brudny was one of the two officers I had chosen to carry out the task the General had outlined in pencil on the map.

In the headquarters dug-out I was met by my small staff: Chief-of-Staff Lieutenant Rakhimov and my junior aide, Lieutenant Donskikh.

Rakhimov reported that there was nothing new. The enemy was still not moving, and was not even sending out reconnoitring patrols. I got down to a few urgent matters with Rakhimov. He had sketched the draft plan of a dummy position a few days earlier. I gave orders to have the dummy position dug immediately and to stop work at the forward fringe, except for camouflaging.

"Very well, Comrade Battalion Commander," said Rakhimov. "May I go and do it now?"

"Yes."

He glanced at Donskikh.

"Will you be needing Lieutenant Donskikh, Comrade Battalion Commander?"

"Yes, I need him."

Rakhimov saluted and went out.

Soon Brudny came in, his cheeks flaming. His lively, intelligent eyes looked all round the dug-out and stopped at me enquiringly, expectantly. Donskikh was sitting at the table writing.

"Donskikh! Come here and bring the map."

I had decided to appoint my adjutant commander of the other reinforced platoon.

3

I know that you think, just as I used to, that a man who has been in battle must be a bit unusual, a bit mysterious. These two, Brudny and Donskikh, had not yet been in battle.

They were both members of the Young Communist League, both had recently finished secondary school and after a course at an officers' school had become lieutenants.

When the Panfilov Division was formed, Donskikh had been appointed a company commander, but had soon been removed because he was too soft with the men. Shy, and often blushing, he was incapable of dealing sternly with offenders. He had not got the strict, exacting character that is indispensable in a commander. All the same, when his company was taken away from him, he felt it very keenly. I realized that he was tormented by the thought that he, a League member, was not trusted to lead a company into action. His pride and self-esteem had been hurt.

Two days before, on October 15, when I had been choosing the men for the night raid, Donskikh had come to me and said, "Let me go too, Comrade Battalion Commander." But my senior aide, Chief-of-Staff Rakhimov, had already been picked for the job, so I merely answered curtly, "No." Donskikh had not turned away immediately. Perhaps I should have added, "Wait a bit, Donskikh, you'll get a chance for a scrap soon enough, don't worry!" But I said no more and neither did Donskikh.

I had had time to get to know my adjutant. I liked his pride, his silence, the scrupulousness with which he carried out orders.

He was standing in front of me now, the map in his hand. I always like to see the face of the man I am giving instructions to. Even though we were living in the same dug-out I could not help giving another searching glance at Donskikh's face, so delicate and smooth, with an almost girlish complexion.

I liked Brudny, too. He was perhaps my best platoon commander. Quick-witted and spry, he always managed to be first to get whatever supplies he needed from the neighbourhood; in his platoon the shovels, axes, and saws were always well sharpened. His platoon was always the first to get a job done, and Brudny was always eager—who is not?—for me to notice it. In such case this sly little fellow was very simple. His sparkling black eyes always seemed to be asking for praise.

Once it happened that I had evidence that Brudny was no coward. His platoon had finished digging foxholes sooner than the others. On inspecting them it seemed to me that they hadn't thrown up enough earth in front of them. I turned to Brudny and asked:

"Do you call this finished?"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"And you intend to put your men in there?"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander."

I took a rifle from one of the men nearby and said:

"Get in there, Lieutenant Brudny!"

He guessed what I meant to do and turned pale.

I said:

"You were going to put your men in there, under enemy fire. Jump in yourself. I'm going to test it."

He hesitated for the fraction of a second, then saluted, turned on his heel and jumped into the trench.

I shouted:

"Stop! Stand aside!"

He pressed against the wall. I fired. The bullet did not go through the breastwork. Brudny had every right to be pleased with himself. His triumphant glance again seemed to be saying: "And now what about it? Don't I deserve a word of praise!"

From that time on, I had taken a liking to this smart little black-eyed lieutenant.

"Sit down, Brudny! Sit down, Donskikh!" I said.

4

Donskikh put down the map. I had already decided in my mind on the places for the ambush, but I checked up again on the map. Then I explained the task: to take cover near the road, dig in and hold on, not permitting the German motorized columns and artillery to move along the road; small reconnoitring parties were to be allowed to pass unmolested but a column must be met with volleys of rifle and machine-gun fire. With the enemy stunned by this unexpected attack, they could easily withdraw their men from the ambush.

"But this is not your aim, Comrades," I said. "On the contrary, you have to wait until the enemy recovers, until he launches a counter-attack. Hold on! Hold the road. Force them to deploy and fight you. That's the first thing. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Brudny answered hesitatingly.

His face, which was usually very expressive, had lost its mobility and was now tense. Donskikh said nothing.

"Do you understand, Donskikh?" I asked.

"I understand, Comrade Battalion Commander. We have to stand to the death. . . ."

"No, Donskikh. You don't have to stand but to act. Manoeuvre. Attack."

"Attack?" Brudny echoed.

"Yes, attack from ambush. Kill as many of the enemy as possible. Then wait. Let them deploy, go into action, and send out forces to encircle you. *Then* you must slip away and come out on the road at another spot, forestalling the enemy and blocking their way again."

I drew a loop of Panfilov's spiral on the map.

"In this way we will force the enemy to deploy prematurely, to attack uselessly and make fools of themselves. Then when they start moving again, attack a second time."

"Attack?" Brudny repeated questioningly.

His face brightened up, his eyes sparkled. Donskikh smiled without saying anything. He also understood.

That word "attack" which Panfilov had put in my mouth worked like a charm. It made the mission clear immediately, rousing something in the men which transformed them, giving them self-confidence. It occurred to me that this was something more profound than a matter of tactics.

We discussed the details. Brudny was excited. Once given the initial impetus his brain set to work. He had already worked out how he would arrange the ambush and hide his men.

"Yes," I said, "the men must dig in well and the camouflage must be good. I say this especially for you, Donskikh. In this matter, Donskikh, there must be absolutely no sparing of your men."

Donskikh looked at me in silence. I repeated Panfilov's words:

"Sparing the men means not sparing them. You understand?"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander," Donskikh replied firmly.

His blue eyes had changed from what they were half an hour before. They had become darker and grimmer.

In our discussion not a word was said about our country or about Moscow, but this was behind the spoken words, this was alive in the thoughts of each of us.

5

The lieutenants left to get their men ready. Once again I lapsed into deep thought. Does that surprise you? The solution had been found, the orders had been given and explained, the men who were to carry them out had understood them thoroughly—what else was there to think about?

The fighting.

When you write about the war, please don't overlook one trifle: in warfare there is such a thing as an enemy. And, strangely enough, he does not always do what you would like him to do.

I felt that the battle of wits had been won by us today, had been won by Panfilov. But what next? Would the Germans really expose themselves to our fire over and over again like sheep? What action would the enemy take once the German commander, that supercilious Junker, had done us the honour to reflect on our presence there?

In warfare there is not one plan, but two; not one operation order, but two. In a battle someone's plan, someone's order remains unfulfilled. Why?

Just give me the answer to that: why?

6

By dusk the platoons were ready to set out.

Lieutenant Donskikh's group fell in near the bridge across the Rusa. I rode over to them on Lysanka. There were only fifty-four men, and all of them were carrying loads. Four of them had light machine-guns; some had zinc ammunition boxes; the telephonists had reels of wire on their backs, and there were two stretcher-bearers with them.

On the right flank stood Sergeant Volkov, carrying a rifle, like everybody else. Volkov, the second in command, was a fitter by trade, glum, but a zealous soldier. Two nights earlier he had been among the hundred men who had raided Sereda and had killed Germans.

I had purposely put them together, raw young Donskikh and this tested forty-year-old Volkov, who I knew would kill his own brother if he ran away from the Germans.

In the early twilight I recognized every one of the men. Many would be using their rifles on the Germans for the first time. The next day the hearts of many of them would pound wildly and then stop dead as they went through their baptism of fire.

What parting message can I give you? Everything I could possibly say to you has already been said; everything has been given you that I could possibly give, Now then, as a parting gift....

"Atten-tion! Left in-cline! Aim for the top of that single fir-tree. Three rounds, volley fire. Platoon...."

Fifty well-greased bolts clicked lightly but threateningly. The men raised the rifles to their shoulders. On the high bank a tall, bushy fir-tree cut a black silhouette against the evening sky. They waited for the executive word of command.

"Fire!" I shouted.

The sound of the volley crashed through the air. A line of little red explosions flashed, lighting up muzzles and bayonets for an instant. Then came the splintering of branches that broke off and fell into the snow. Once again the bolts clicked and the rifles were pressed to the men's shoulders. The black tree top was no longer solid, gaps showed in it here and there.

"Fire!"

The red stings flashed out, there was the crash of the volley and this time, too, heavy branches came hurtling to earth.

"Fire!"

After the third volley the tree top bent over as if it had been axed, straightened up again, then leaned over to form an obtuse angle that slowly decreased. It hung like that for a few seconds and then crashed through the lower branches and thudded to the ground. Instead of the graceful tip, the jagged edge of a truncated cone now stood out blackly against the sky.

At my command the platoon ordered arms.

"Good shooting!" I said.

The men's answer was like a volley, as they shouted with one voice:

"We serve the Soviet Union!"

"That's the way to fire at the Germans!" I told them. "At the command, a single volley! A sudden storm of death, not like a piffling drizzle! Have faith in your rifles, Comrades! Lieutenant Donskikh, you may march off!"

I saw Brudny's platoon off at another spot.

7

I expected that Donskikh's or Brudny's platoon would engage the enemy the next day, October 18. But the Germans did not move on our sector either that day or the next.

Both ambushes dug good underground quarters on the outskirts of the forest, suitable for a lengthy battle.

Observers were watching both roads from the tops of the pine-trees, but no Germans were to be seen on either. Several times a day, as had been arranged, Donskikh and Brudny reported by telephone: "The enemy is not in sight."

Along the whole central sector of the Volokolamsk Fortified Area there was not the slightest pressure from the enemy during these days. The Germans did not even send out patrols.

But from the flank, from beyond the left wing of our battalion, from behind the woods into which the Rusa ran, came the incessant rumble of gun-fire. Our anti-tank artillery was active there. Panfilov had transferred all the anti-aircraft machine-guns, including those that had previously been attached to my battalion, there, to the left flank of the Division. To this area he had also transferred a company from the battalion on our right, ordering the remaining troops to extend and close the gap. At night we followed the changes in the line of battle by the glow of fires, and in the day-time by the sound of gun-fire. The thuds of the guns did not come any closer. On the contrary, at times the rumble seemed to recede, but it was receding farther into the rear of our front line, moving more and more directly behind our backs.

In general I knew the situation. The focal point of the German drive remained the same as it had been on October 16. They concentrated their forces and began to move, two or three of their divisions, including a tank division, breaking through to the main road between Mozhaisk and Volokolamsk. This road lay behind us, parallel to the front line and at right angles to the Volokolamsk Highway. Now they were pushing towards Volokolamsk.

Our battalion screened the forces fighting on this road from a blow on the flank and in the rear. But the Germans were not drawing closer to us, the no-man's-land eight to ten miles wide still lay between us and the enemy.

8

On October 20 Donskikh rang up before the time fixed.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, a lorry is coming our way. German infantry."

"One lorry?"

"Yes."

"Let it pass."

A few minutes later Donskikh called again.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, a column of lorries is in sight. Also carrying infantry."

"How many?"

"Can't see the end. So far ten. Sorry, I've just been informed that two more have been sighted."

"Now look here, Donskikh..." I said.

"Don't lose your head?" Donskikh finished for me, and I heard him take a deep breath over the receiver. "Is that right, Comrade Battalion Commander?"

"That's right."

"Very well, Comrade Battalion Commander. We won't let them pass!"

Donskikh left the telephone and I sat there with the receiver to my ear. At the other end of the wire, which was hidden underground, sat a signaller who kept me informed of what was taking place. My sense of hearing had grown keener. I caught not only the words but the tone in which they were spoken. Sitting at headquarters—

some five miles away from the platoon—I seemed to see exactly what the signaller was seeing from his trench.

Long, open lorries were moving slowly down the road, that had again been frozen hard and was lightly sprinkled with the early October snow. German soldiers armed with rifles and sub-machine guns sitting on benches along the sides and in the middle of the lorries. Today this seems almost incredible, but at that time, outside Moscow, in October 1941, this was how the Germans advanced without even reconnoitring, without patrols, without flank guards; in comfort, riding in lorries, confident that at the first encounter "Russ" would take to his heels.

But "Russ" was lying at the edge of the forest never taking his eyes off the men in the greenish great-coats and forage-caps riding over our territory like lords—lying there with bated breath, gripping his levelled rifle and waiting for the command: "Fire!"

I thought I heard a crackling in the receiver and involuntarily called out:

"What's happening there?"

The sound was repeated.

"What's happening?"

"We're firing, Comrade Battalion Commander. I'm firing too."

"In volleys?"

"Yes, by command, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"And the Germans?"

An intolerably long silence followed.

"They're running!" shouted the orderly. "By God, they're running. . . ."

A wave of elation swept over me. The Germans were running! So that's how it was done; that's how to make them run! Yes, that meant we did have strength to crush them body and soul, to make these Germans forget discipline in a flash, forget that they were the "higher race," the conquerors of the world, an invincible army. Oh, if only we had some cavalry now! If only we could dash out on our horses and slash, slash, slash until they recovered their senses, as long as they were running!

I revelled not only in victory, but in the secret of victory, which seemed revealed to my mind's eye. We had the strength! What was it called? No; even then I was still unable to give it a name.

9

A little later Donskikh reported by telephone that during the first moments of the ambush they had killed about a hundred of the Germans, while three or four times as many had taken to their heels. The Germans got out of range, pulled themselves together again, spread out, dropped to the ground and opened fire.

"Fine. We've proved what we wanted to," I said. "Keep them on the hop. Let them beat about the bush. Keep your men under cover, but watch the flanks."

I followed the course of the fighting by the telephone reports. At first the Germans had only answered our fire with tommy-guns, rifles and machine-guns. Then they brought up their mortars. At that time the vast numbers of mortars available to them was one of the advantages Hitler's army had over us. The motorized infantry used to carry mortars in their lorries piled up like firewood.

Our men took cover in their shelters. A German scouting party which moved towards the woods after a two-hour barrage was fired on. The platoon was intact. The platoon was holding the road.

I informed my company commanders of the way the fighting was going and told them to let their men hear all about it. It would do them good to know what a pasting their comrades were giving the Germans.

Sevryukov, Commander of No. 2 Company, answered:

"The men know it all already, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"How's that?"

"The soldiers' wireless telephone is operating."

I could sense that Sevryukov was smiling as he spoke.

"What sort of telephone is that?"

"Some wounded have been brought back, and the way they're trying to outdo each other in talking about the fighting—I'm simply amazed, Comrade Battalion Commander...."

Sevryukov hesitated before expressing his thought. I smiled, too, as I listened to him, my interest roused.

"I'm amazed, Comrade Battalion Commander.... The men are wounded—some are suffering considerable pain—and yet they're all cheerful. 'We pasted the bastards,' they keep on saying. And it seems the wounds are less painful when they talk like that.... So you see, Comrade Battalion Commander, it turns out that even wounded men can raise the morale."

"How many wounded have come in?"

"Four.... Their wounds have been dressed, but they ought to be taken to the dressing-station as soon as possible. But there's no getting rid of them; they just keep jabbering away about the way they fought."

His delighted voice roused an answering thrill in my heart. I rang off.

Rakhimov sprang to his feet.

"Permit me to go and speak to the wounded, Comrade Battalion Commander, so as to find out more details about the situation over there."

"Yes, go ahead."

10

A little later Donskikh rang up again. He stated that the Germans had sent out two groups of about forty men each on either flank, with the obvious intention of outflanking the platoon and encircling it. There was anxiety in his voice. I realized that he was beginning to feel a bit alarmed and wanted to ask whether it wasn't now time to withdraw. But proud and shy as ever, he did not ask.

"Never mind, Donskikh," I said. "Send out a section to watch their movements. If the opportunity offers, let them open fire. Don't you be afraid. They're afraid of you."

Donskikh's next report was as follows:

"Comrade Battalion Commander, we're under fire from three sides. They're shouting: 'Russ, surrender!' "

"And you?"

"We're firing back."

"Good. Hold them up, Donskikh."

This time he blurted out:

"Comrade Battalion Commander! They may surround us...."

"Never mind, Donskikh. It's getting on for evening. In the dark you'll be able to give them the slip. Hold 'em, boy!"

The last word slipped out spontaneously. It wasn't a term laid down in regulations, but it came straight from my heart.

Perhaps you are wondering why Donskikh was anxious? You may feel that he had cold feet, that his nerves weren't too strong. But you must bear in mind that he wasn't sitting at an office desk or at the work bench. He wasn't on a parade. Death was all around him. He could hear it whistle, and see it—the Germans were firing tracer bullets. Death was flying from all directions like red and blue fire-flies. It kept passing so close it nearly touched him and his heart quaked in spite of his reason, in spite of his will. He was not a machine, not a senseless block, nor was he made of iron. He was going through his first battle—a critical moment in anyone's life.

Even though five miles separated us I could feel the throb of his heart. The spiritual strength which I, more by instinct than consciously, strove to support in him, the officer on the forward position, he, in turn, passed on to his men.

And suddenly, quite unexpectedly, without any preliminaries, Donskikh reported excitedly that the Germans were retreating. At first I did not believe my ears. But the window of my dug-out was already dark. The day was over. Soon Donskikh confirmed it. Yes, the Germans had fired, shouted, and withdrawn, taking away their dead under cover of the dusk.

It had been only a minor affair, but I was in a fever of elation. I wanted to laugh out loud, to jump on my horse and gallop over to Donskikh, to the men, to our heroes.

That night Lieutenant Donskikh's platoon changed its position.

"YOU GAVE UP MOSCOW!"

1

The next morning the guns began to fire dully behind us, far in the rear again. But on the battalion's front all was quiet. At regular times Donskikh and Brudny reported that the roads were clear. A long way ahead of us were the observers, watching the Germans from tall trees as they had done the day before.

I was expecting an urgent call. It came, and the telephonist reported:

"Comrade Battalion Commander, it's from out there. . . ."

The telephonist knew everything that was going on and there was no need to explain. I knew where the call was from.

"Yes. . . ."

"Comrade Battalion Commander, just listen to this: German cavalry. . . . They're coming along the road."

I recognized Brudny's quick way of talking. Apparently his turn had come. Brudny's platoon, as you know, lay in ambush on the other road.

"How many?"

"About twenty."

"Let them pass."

Following on the cavalry, a group of motor cyclists appeared. Today the enemy was operating more warily. He had sent patrols out ahead of his vanguard. Our men, however, were well hidden in the forest.

The roadside copse where Brudny's platoon was lying in wait for the Germans was not very large, but about five hundred yards away was another grove to which they could easily run at the proper moment and from which they could again come out on the road after having given the enemy the slip.

An hour later the mounted Germans and motor cyclists passed on their way back. They thought that the road was clear for them all the way to the river.

Shortly after, Brudny reported that a column of motorized infantry had come in sight. Assuming that the road had already been reconnoitred, the Germans were advancing as they had done the day before, riding in their lorries and without flank guards.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander, we're ready."

"Let them get well up to you before you let them have it! Keep cool!"

The voice that answered was confident and serious:

"Very well, Comrade Battalion Commander."

Again a signaller kept me informed of what was happening. Yesterday's events were repeated on this road, too. A volley from ambush . . . a second . . . a third. And again the Germans jumped down from their lorries and fled in a panic-stricken mob forgetting orders and discipline, forgetting everything they had been taught.

I asked the telephonist how the fighting was going.

"Are they still running? Or are they taking cover? Tell me exactly!"

"They're running, Comrade Battalion Commander.... Running as if the devil was after them. We've just given them another dose...."

Only the day before I had wondered how the Germans ought to act if they came under sudden, totally unexpected volley fire. They ought to throw themselves to the ground, taking every advantage of cover and open a hurricane fire in return. One would think that even without orders the instinct of self-preservation would dictate such a course. But there seemed to be some force that paralyzed their ability to think, that robbed them of their reason and played strange tricks with them, making them easy victims for death to claim.

It was during those early battles of ours that my mind told me what that force was, enabled me to understand it. But don't hurry, when the time comes I'll tell what it is and we'll discuss it.

2

At the very beginning of the action, the line to Brudny's platoon went dead.

The linesmen who were sent out to look for a break came back and reported that they had run into the Germans. I questioned them in detail, not understanding what had happened. It seems that they had been fired on from a village on the road. They did not know how many Germans there were or whether trucks had broken through to the village.

This was unexpected and alarming news.

Where was our platoon? What had happened to it? Had they really been surrounded? Surely Brudny, that resourceful, quick-witted officer, could not have let slip the moment when he should have withdrawn.

What was I to do? I could not leave my men to be wiped out. But how could I help them? With what? I felt a terrible impulse to take a platoon myself and go to their rescue. But I hadn't the right to do that. I had a battalion to look after, I had five miles of front, and it was my duty to stay where I was.

With an aching heart I tried to reason things out coolly. Suppose the platoon had been surrounded. Would my fifty soldiers, those fine lads, surrender? Would they put up their hands? No, they would fight to the last. I believed that, I trusted the men and their commander. They had rifles, four light machine-guns and plenty of ammunition. The enemy would not find it easy to get near them.

I sent half a reconnaissance platoon to help them out. Half a platoon! Such were the forces with which we fought in those days! I ordered the commander: "Creep up to them. Don't take any unnecessary risks. Use your head and keep yourself well in hand. Wait until it is dark and then get in touch with Brudny and help him."

I ordered the commander to tell Brudny that when he had fought his way out he must take his platoon back to the road as he had been ordered, prepare another ambush and next day stop the Germans with small armfire again.

3

After dismissing the officer I left the dug-out. It was still two hours to sunset but the sky was dark and overcast. I did not want to see anyone or to talk. I could think of nothing but the platoon that had been cut off, the fifty soldiers fighting somewhere in the roadside woods.

Slowly I walked down to the river. In the field my men were digging the frozen ground, dragging up timber, building the dummy position. I did not want to go over to them either. From where I was it seemed to me that they were dawdling, digging in half-hearted fashion. Hurry!

Our men, fifty soldiers, are holding on, fighting across the river, winning these hours for us, these minutes, holding the enemy in check. I felt that if I went over to them my taut nerves would snap and I would bawl at the guilty and innocent alike.

I strained my ears to catch the sound of German mortars from across the river. But everything was quiet there. And suppose everything was already over? What if I should never again see Brudny, Kurbatov, and the others I cared for so much?

Later, when the war had hardened me that way, I did not often feel so deeply or suffer such anguish.

I went back to the dug-out and tried to settle down to wait for the reconnaissance party and news.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, you're wanted on the telephone," the operator called to me.

Lieutenant Sevryukov, Commander of No. 2. Company, was on the line.

"Comrade Battalion Commander," he reported. "Lieutenant Brudny's platoon has broken out of encirclement."

4

"How do you know?" I asked quickly.

"How do I know? Why, they're here, Comrade Batalion Commander."

"Where?"

"Why, as I've been reporting," Sevryukov said in that leisurely way of his that so frequently drove me wild, "as I've been saying, Comrade Battalion Commander, they're here. They've entered my company lines."

"Who?"

I still did not understand, or to be more exact, I already understood, but....

But perhaps now, in a moment, everything would turn out to be quite different.

Sevryukov answered:

"Lieutenant Brudny. And the men. Those who are left. Six were killed, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"And the Germans? The road?"

The question had simply slipped out, although what was the point of asking? It was clear enough.... I heard Sevryukov's answer: the road had been seized by the enemy. But I could say nothing. Sevryukov asked:

"Comrade Battalion Commander, are you there?"

"Yes."

"Shall I call Lieutenant Brudny to the telephone, Comrade Battalion Commander?"

"There's no need."

"Shall I send him to you?"

"There's no need."

"Then what shall I do?"

"Wait for me."

I put down the receiver, but I did not get up immediately.

5

So there it was—the very worst that could have happened.

It was not only the loss of the road that was so bad. I was prepared for that. According to our tactical plan that should have happened the next day or the day after.

But, today, my lieutenant, my platoon, my men, had abandoned the road without orders. They had fled!

A few minutes later I rode up to No. 2 Company's command post. Three days back, in the twilight of that memorable evening, I had seen the men off not far from there. Now, too, it was dusk. But then, three days ago, I had been greeted by the men on parade. Now the men who had returned were sitting or lying on the snow-covered ground, exhausted.

Near the dug-out, on the slope of a mound that merged into the uneven surface of the bank, stood a group of officers. A short figure broke away from the group and came running towards me. As he ran he shouted:

"Get up! Fall in! Atten-tion!"

It was Brudny. When he came up to me, he saluted smartly and stood to attention.

"Comrade Battalion Commander," he began, speaking rather agitatedly.

I interrupted him:

"Lieutenant Sevryukov! Come here!"

The forty-year-old Sevryukov came running up clumsily.

"Who's the senior officer here?"

"I am, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Why aren't you taking command then? Why isn't the platoon lined up? What sort of rabble is this? Fall everybody in, officers as well!"

Boszhanov, the political officer of the machine-gun company, came up. In a low voice he asked me in Kazakh:

"*Aksakal!* What's happened?"

I answered him in Russian:

"Don't orders apply to you, Comrade Political Officer? Get to your place!"

For a few seconds Boszhanov stood still, his round face raised to mine. He obviously wanted to say something, but could not pluck up the courage, realizing that I would not permit or tolerate any interference at that moment.

The line of the ranks stood out black against the snow. All was quiet. Only from the distance, from the rear far to the east, the muffled roar of gun-fire reached us. I walked over to the ranks. This time Sevryukov reported. Beside him, standing tensely to attention, stood Brudny. I turned to him.

"Make your report."

He began to speak hurriedly.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, today the reinforced platoon under my command wiped out about a hundred

Nazis. But we were surrounded. I decided to attack and break through. . . ."

"Splendid! And why didn't you return to the road again?"

"Comrade Battalion Commander, we were pursued. . . ."

"Pursued?" I shouted with rage and loathing. "Pursued? And you dare say such a thing in justification? The enemy has announced that he will pursue us to the Urals. Is that what you think? We'll surrender Moscow, surrender our country, run back to our families, to the old folks and women, and say, 'They pursued us. . . .' Just like that, eh? Answer me!"

Brudny said nothing.

"Too bad," I went on, "that the women can't hear you. They'd slap your face for you and spit on you. You're no officer of the Red Army; you're a coward."

Once again the muffled roar of gun-fire came from the rear.

"Do you hear that? The Germans are there, too, behind us. Over there the enemy is trying to break through to Moscow. Our brothers are fighting there. We, our battalion, are covering them here from a flank attack. They trust us, trust us to stand and not to let the Germans pass. And I trusted you. You held the road, blocked it. And you ratted. You ran away. You think it was only a road you abandoned? No, you've given up Moscow!"

"I . . . I . . . thought. . . ."

"I have nothing more to say to you. You may go!"

"Where?"

"Over there, where you should be now according to orders."

I pointed across the river. Brudny jerked his head as though he wanted to look behind him, to where my finger was pointing. But he restrained himself and continued to stand to attention facing me.

"But over there, Comrade Battalion Commander..." he began in a hoarse voice.

"Yes, the Germans are there! Go to them! Kill them, or work for them, if you want to! I gave you no orders to come here. I don't need runaways! Go!"

"With the platoon?" asked Brudny hesitantly.

"No! The platoon will have another commander. Go alone!"

There are many ways in which a battalion commander can use his authority against an officer who does not obey orders: he may send him back into action; remove him from his command; hand him over to a court-martial, or, if circumstances warrant it, he may even shoot him on the spot. And I... I, too, was trying him summarily. It came to the same thing as shooting him in front of the troops—even if he didn't suffer physically—the shooting of an officer who, forgetting his honour, has fled with his men from the enemy. I had punished dishonour with dishonour.

Brudny still stood in front of the silent ranks as though he did not understand that I had no more to say to him and that I had driven him out of the battalion. It was a terrible moment for him. He was a member of the Young Communist League. He had, of course, often thought about war and of death. He had known that he might have to sacrifice his life for his country. He had dreamed of performing brave deeds, he had dreamed of the joy of victory and with it he had dreamed of the awards, the fame, of that personal happiness, which, small though it was, was infinitely dear to him.

The war had come, real war, and there had been real fighting, but he, the Young Communist Brudny, lieutenant and platoon commander, had fled with his platoon. And sentence had already been passed, passed by the sole authority of his superior officer, the Battalion Commander. And all the dreams were wiped away. He had saved his own life, but there was no life for him any more. He had been called "coward" in front of his men and had been drummed out!

He stood there as if this terrible fact—worse than death, perhaps—had not yet reached his consciousness, as though he were waiting for some last word from me. But I was looking straight at him in silence. At that moment I was like a man of stone. No pity stirred in my heart. Anyone who has been in action will understand me. At such moments hatred flares up like a flame, burning out all other contradictory feelings.

At last Brudny realized that everything had been said. He found the strength to raise his hand to his cap in a salute.

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander!"

Having said this he turned on his heel, in parade style. And he walked off with rapid steps, as if hurrying to get away, towards the bridge across the Rusa, into the darkness that concealed the enemy.

6

A man's shadow broke away from the black wall that was the platoon and ran after Brudny. Everyone heard him call:

"Comrade Lieutenant, I'm going with you. . . ."

I recognized the tall, broad-shouldered silhouette with the tommy-gun over its shoulder. I knew the voice.

"Kurbatov, come back!"

He halted.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, we're to blame too."

"Who gave you permission to leave the ranks?"

"Comrade Battalion Commander, he can't go there alone. There—"

"Who gave you permission to leave the ranks? Get back to your place! If you have to speak to me, address me as you should an officer of the Red Army."

Kurbatov went back to his place in the ranks and then said:

"Comrade Battalion Commander, allow me to speak to you."

"No! This isn't a meeting! I know you all ran away with the commander. But the commander is responsible for you. If he orders you to run, it is your duty to run! Do all of you hear me? If the commander orders you to run, you are in duty bound to run. He takes the responsibility. But when the commander orders you to halt, then he himself and every one of you, every honest soldier, is in duty bound to kill anyone who runs away. Your commander was unable to keep control of you, to stop you, to shoot on the spot whoever did not obey him. For that he must pay."

Out of the shadows that had swallowed him up, Brudny suddenly appeared again like an apparition. As well as a new surge of hatred I now felt contempt. Had he come to beg me to let him off? Was he funking again?

"What do you want?"

"Comrade Battalion Commander, whom should I turn my papers over to?"

"What papers have you got?"

Stammering slightly, Brudny answered:

"My League membership card, my officer's certificate and some letters."

I called over Boszhanov.

"Comrade Political Officer, take his papers."

Brudny took a little packet of papers from his inside coat-pocket and held it out to Boszhanov.

"*Aksakal*," Boszhanov whispered to me softly.

He said nothing more, but this one word was a plea. Brudny stood there without raising his head. It seemed to me that this was the cunning of a coward. He had probably counted on this when he came back, calculating that the Battalion Commander would call out the Political Officer, who would put in a good word for him. "So you're trying your tricks on me, instead of on the enemy?" I thought to myself. "I wanted to give you a chance to save your honour, but since you have proved a coward again, the devil take you—die in dishonour."

Out loud I said:

"Brudny, you may keep your papers. You needn't go out there. There's another road you can take." (I pointed to the path leading to the rear.) "Go to Regimental Headquarters. . . . Report that I have driven you out of the battalion and handed you over for court-martial. . . . Make your excuses there."

Brudny gulped with a scarcely audible, whistling sound that was strangely like a sob.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, I . . . I'll show you. . . . I'll kill. . . ." His voice was trembling now. "I'll kill the sentry there. . . . I'll bring back his gun and his papers. . . . I'll show you. . . ."

As I listened to him my hatred waned and vanished. I felt like whispering so that only he could hear: "Good boy, good boy, that's right!" I was touched but no one knew it.

"Go wherever you like! I don't need you."

"Take it, Comrade Political Officer," whispered Brudny.

Boszhanov switched on his flash-light. The beam slid over Brudny's dark, hollow-cheeked face. His eyes were sunken and two dark patches stood out on his jutting cheek-bones. Then the light dropped to the packet of papers. Boszhanov took them. The light went out.

Turning on his heel, Brudny walked off quickly.

"Kurbatov, give the lieutenant a tommy-gun!" I shouted.

That was the only thing I could do for him. I was responsible for the morale of the battalion, for the sector—the sector of men and the sector of land along the bank of the Rusa—that barred the way to Moscow.

ANOTHER BATTLE ON THE ROAD

1

When I got back to headquarters, I sent for Kurbatov.

He came in looking depressed. He, too, had been one of those who had let themselves be chased by the enemy—this man who carried his head so proudly, this strong, good-looking, apparently brave man. Why? Why had this happened? That was what I had to find out.

"Tell me what happened out there," I ordered him. "Why did you all run away?"

Kurbatov reported tersely. During the exchange of fire with the Germans they had heard the rattle of tommy-guns quite close behind them. Tracer bullets had come flying from a clump of trees at their backs. Brudny had shouted: "Follow me!" and the platoon, holding their rifles at the hip, had dashed from the wood to the near-by grove, as had been previously arranged. But suddenly from there too they met heavy fire. Someone fell, someone screamed. The men ran away and from that moment it was no longer possible to stop them. Fast as they ran, tracer bullets kept coming after them. The Germans started to chase them, firing as they came, and keeping almost on their heels.

"How many of them were there?" I asked. "How many tommy-gunners were there chasing you?"

"I don't know, Comrade Battalion Commander," Kurbatov answered dourly.

"Maybe a dozen? Or perhaps fewer?"

Kurbatov was silent, his eyes were lowered.

"You may go," I said.

2

Kurbatov went out.

What was going on in the mind of this soldier I knew so well? He was obviously very much ashamed of himself.

Shame. . . . Have you thought what that is? In war, if a soldier's sense of shame is deadened, if this inner self-judgement is paralyzed, there is no training and no discipline that will hold the army together.

Stampeded by the bullets, Kurbatov had fled with the others. Fear had shrieked in his ear:

"It's all up with you! Your young life is finished! You're going to be killed or maimed for good now. Save your skin somehow; hide, run!"

But at the same time he had heard another and authoritative voice:

"No, halt! It is shameful to run away. You will be despised as a coward! Stop, fight, be a worthy son of your country!"

Oh, how necessary at that moment of desperate inner struggle, when the decision trembled in the balance and the man's soul was rent in twain, how necessary at that moment was a word of command! The calm, loud and clear voice of his commander would have recalled him to his sense of duty. The word of command would have enabled him to wrench himself free from the clutch of panic, would have brought into play the control which had been instilled by military training, besides the emotional stimulus of the soldier's conscience, his sense of honour and love of country.

Brudny had lost his head and had let slip the moment when he could, and should, have given the word of command. Because of this the platoon had been routed. Because of this an honest soldier was now ashamed to look me in the face.

3

The commander of the platoon had paid the penalty for his fault.

And I? After all, for everything that had happened and would happen in the battalion, for every failure, for every case of flight, for every officer and man, I was responsible. This platoon had not obeyed orders—which meant that I had not obeyed orders.

I reported the incident to Regimental Headquarters, made the required explanations and replaced the receiver.... And then I put myself on trial before that most merciless of judges, my own conscience.

I had to get to the root cause of my failure. Had I placed an unreliable officer in command of the platoon? Had I failed to discover in time that he was a coward? No; that wasn't it. After all, in spite of having run away, in spite of his public humiliation, he had still been able to rouse my affection by showing that the sense of honour was alive in him.

What, then, had happened to him out there, under the bullets? Why had he forgotten his duty as an officer? Perhaps he had been affected by the cowardice of the others? But then, I did not believe that my soldiers were cowards. Perhaps I had not trained them properly? In this respect, too, I could find no fault with myself.

The truth came to me very gradually and only sketchily and indistinctly.

Only a few days before, when I had given Brudny his orders, I had thought: "Surely the Germans aren't sheep to let themselves be slaughtered by our volleys time after time?" But the thought only flashed through my mind, and I had not drawn any conclusions from it. I had thought the enemy to be more stupid than he really was.

Obviously, our first ambush had forced the German commander to reconsider the position. He had reacted more quickly than I had expected him to. Obviously, he had had a plan of some sort ready in the event of again running into an ambush, and I had not guessed it in time. He had answered surprise with surprise. He had put my platoon to flight; had driven off my men by the very same means—unexpected fire at almost point-blank range—the same trick that had thrown his own soldiers into a panic.

Today he had won; had routed me—thinking of my battalion I used the word "me"—not because his officers and soldiers were any braver or any better trained, nor because of numerical superiority (according to our tactical plan even small forces should have immobilized superior numbers for a long time). He had won in his turn by a tactical manoeuvre, a plan, by the use of his wits.

Yes, I had not thought enough yesterday! I had been beaten before the battle. That was my mistake.

4

I studied the map. In my imagination I reconstructed the scene of the action and of the flight. I tried to imagine how my enemy, the German commander, had planned and carried out his operation.

My men had fled. In my mind's eye I saw it. I saw them hurrying and panting, lashed by the gleaming thongs of tracer bullets, whipped on by death. How many copses, bushes and ravines there had been in their path! They could easily have taken cover, dropped to the ground and turned their weapons against the enemy, could have let the Germans approach, triumphant, gripped by the excitement of the chase, and then shot them down quite coolly at close quarters.

But Brudny had lost his head. Brudny had lost control of himself and of his soldiers. That was his crime.

But I, the Battalion Commander, should have thought for him, should have foreseen everything yesterday, before the battle.

The enemy had captured the road. But so far only one road. The other was still not in his hands. There Donskikh's platoon, changing its place of ambush, was lying in wait for the Germans. Tomorrow the enemy would try by some means to put that platoon to flight as well and drive it off.

5

I got in touch with Donskikh by telephone and ordered him to take an escort and report to me.

About an hour and a half later he reached headquarters.

There was no visible change in him. The skin on his hands and face was just as delicate and white. When he came in he blushed slightly with embarrassment. But his very first word, his very first gesture, showed me that he was different. On meeting my glance he smiled. It was the familiar, slightly shy smile, but there was something new in it, a sort of inner strength. It was as if he knew that he had the right to smile. His movements too had become more confident and quicker. He saluted and reported without the hesitancy he used to show.

"Sit down," I said, "and get out your map."

The site of his present ambush had not been marked in any way on his map. In such cases a secret must not be trusted even to a map. But the site of the first action was no longer a secret and Donskikh had ringed it round with a red circle as though to remember it. I looked at it. We both knew that a real test of morale had taken place there, and that there the tremendous elation of victory had been experienced. Both of us knew it, but neither of us said a word about it.

"You see, Donskikh," I said, "last time we talked it over we decided to let the enemy go ahead with his outflanking movement. That can be allowed up to a point. Only don't let yourself be completely surrounded."

Donskikh nodded. I went on.

"The enemy, however, may surround you before you are aware of it. For instance, like this.... He envelops you from this flank." I pointed to the map with the blunt end of the pencil. "Here you have a way out. You get out, begin to withdraw, but the enemy, who has brought up his men unnoticed in readiness, is already lying in wait on your path of retreat. And he will greet you with point-blank fire. What then?"

"What?" echoed Donskikh. "Bayonets!"

"Oh, Donskikh!... They're too far off for bayonets; they'd shoot you down! Won't you lose your head? Won't you run?"

He lifted his head.

"I, Comrade Battalion Commander, will not run."

"I'm not speaking of you alone. Won't your men run?"

Donskikh said nothing, scanning the map and thinking, searching for an honest answer.

"Of course, Donskikh, you must fight even in the most desperate situation. But why should we get caught in such a situation? Let the Germans get caught. With the bayonet you can kill one man, but with your brain you can kill a thousand. That's a Kazakh saying."

"But how, Comrade Battalion Commander?"

His youthful blue eyes looked at me trustingly.

"Run!" I said. "Run in disorder, in a panic, as the Germans want you to! Fight for ten or fifteen minutes for appearance's sake and then run, panic-stricken. Let them chase you! That's just what we need! It's we who'll be leading the dance. They won't really be chasing us, but we will force them, understand, force them by cunning, to run after us. You follow the road and then drop some men into this ravine." I touched the map again with the blunt end of my pencil. "Or you can choose another suitable spot. There you must take cover immediately, on the instant. Let the Germans pass the first group. The second will meet them with machine-gun fire and point-blank volleys. They will bolt, make a bee-line back. Then you must lash them from here, again point-blank in the face. Catch them between two fires and shoot down every man taking part in the pursuit! Understand?"

Living through this battle in imagination, I glanced at Donskikh with a triumphant smile. Donskikh did not smile in return, but I saw by his eyes that he had caught the idea. Still, in the depths of his pupils, I saw a shudder that seemed to have been frozen there for an instant.

I did not realize immediately what was the matter with him.

Was he experiencing a moment of horror before the battle, before the blood bath that he was about to perpetrate?

Nevertheless he answered firmly enough.

"I understand, Comrade Battalion Commander."

After discussing various details, I said to him:

"Explain the manoeuvre to your men."

"Manoeuvre?" he repeated.

For some reason or other this word struck him as being strange. Most likely he had never before connected the word "manoeuvre" with this, with the annihilation of the enemy. However he replied immediately in the correct form:

"Very good, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Well then, Donskikh, that's all."

He got up.

Next day this youngster with the gentle face and sensitive nature would have to lure the enemy into a trap and shoot down the stampeding, fear-crazed men at point-blank range. But I saw that he would have the strength to do it.

6

It seemed that I had succeeded in drawing from the experience of that day's failure a lesson to ensure success on the next occasion.

I felt lighter at heart. On dismissing Donskikh I lay down, covered myself with my coat and turned my face to the wall to snatch a few moments' sleep. For some time my brain continued active and then I dozed off.

In front of my closed eyes I could see the map and Donskikh's attentive face. I was pointing out something on the map with the blunt end of my pencil and saying to him: "They'll start running and rush here, and at this point we'll meet them with fire again!"

And suddenly—I can still see it quite vividly—I saw someone else's pencil, not mine, touching the map. Mine was an ordinary lead pencil while this one had a sharp blue point and polished red sides. The hand was not mine either. It was white and covered with light reddish hair.

My glance travelled from the hand to the face. Yes, this was my adversary, the German commander with the hard, keen eyes. Addressing someone who was standing beside him, he repeated word for word what I had said. (I did not understand their language and yet, at the same time, I did understand it—in dreams and in the visions that come before dreams, such peculiarities occur.) "They'll start running and rush here, and at this point we'll meet them with fire again!" And under the sharp point of the pencil I saw the line of my battalion instead of the ravine that was to be tomorrow's trap for the Nazis. I strained my eyes to see the spot to which the pencil was pointing, bent my whole body forward.... And opened my eyes....

The familiar paraffin lamp was burning in the dug-out. The telephonist was sitting in a corner at the instrument.

I turned to the wall and tried to fall asleep again. I remembered Brudny's face when the flashlight had lit it up for a moment: suffering, but not without dignity, the sunken eyes and the feverish spots on the suddenly prominent cheek-bones. I remembered his voice that trembled at the last minute saying: "I'll show you.... I'll show you." Something else flashed before my mind's eye and then everything grew confused as I fell into a heavy, uneasy sleep.

7

When I got up next morning, my batman, Sinchenko, came up to me with a mysterious look.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, out there," he said pointing to the door, "is Lieutenant Brudny.... He's waiting for you to get up."

"What's he doing here?"

But my heart started thumping. So he had come back! Had he done what he had said he would do?

"He made his way to the Germans, Comrade Battalion Commander," Sinchenko said hurriedly. "Brought back some tommy-guns. He's sitting out there now and won't speak to anybody. He wants to see you personally."

"Let him come in," I said.

Sinchenko disappeared. A minute later the door opened again. Without saying a word Brudny walked up to the table where I was sitting and put down two German submachine guns, two German soldiers' service books, a few letters, a notebook, and some German paper money and coins. His lips were pressed together in a straight line. He looked at me unflinchingly with his sunken black eyes, but his gaze was wild and he was frowning.

I tried to tell him to sit down, but suddenly felt that I couldn't say a word because of the lump in my throat. I took out a cigarette, got up, walked over to my coat for some matches, although I had matches in my breeches' pocket, lit up and stood by the little window that had been cut under the sloping log roof. I stared for a moment into the daylight, at the trunks and bared roots of the pines and at the light sprinkling of snow that lay in patches between the trees. Then I turned round and said quietly:

"Sit down, Brudny.... Have you had your breakfast?"

He did not answer. At that moment he too was unable to speak. Sinchenko looked in at the door. Then he came up to me and whispered:

"Shall I put some vodka on the table for breakfast, Comrade Battalion Commander?"

My dear old Sinchenko knew what had happened the day before just as everyone else in the battalion did. Now, too, he understood everything.

"Yes," I said, "pour out a glass for the lieutenant."

We breakfasted together. Brudny told me about his night wanderings and how he had killed two Germans. There was just the slightest glimpse of the old Brudny every now and then in his eyes, which sparkled slightly after the vodka.

"But what about yesterday, Brudny? What happened to you?" I asked. "How was it that you retreated without orders?"

He frowned. He did not want to speak about that.

"But you know...."

"I don't know...."

"But you said..." he muttered even more reluctantly.

"You panicked?"

He nodded. Now that it had been said he found it easier to talk about it.

"I can't understand myself, Comrade Battalion Commander.... It was—how shall I put it?—as if a brick had landed on my head.... And I was no longer myself.... I stopped thinking...."

His shoulders twitched nervously.

"Like a brick?" I asked him.

Suddenly the words I had been looking for to express my idea flashed across my mind. A psychological blow! In that minute I named for my own benefit the secret of battle, the secret of victory in battle.

A blow aimed at their psychology, at their minds, at their morale!

Strange as it may seem, that moment, when nothing was actually happening, remains one of my most vivid memories of the whole war.

A psychological blow! We haven't any special rays for affecting the mind. Warfare is waged with weapons of physical extermination, which injure the body and not the mind, not the psyche. But in fact they do act on the mind as well! And after the mind has been affected, after the spirit has been broken, it is easy to pursue, to catch up with, and destroy or capture the enemy wholesale.

That is what our opponent was trying to do to us. Once, Herr Great German, you succeeded in doing this to me, to my platoon. No more of that!

To Brudny I said:

"Now this is what I want to say. . . . For the time being I won't give you a platoon, although I don't think you're afraid of the Germans any more. I'm going to send you out to them. I appoint you second-in-command of the reconnaissance platoon."

He jumped up delightedly.

"Thank you, Comrade Battalion Commander!"

I dismissed him.

A psychological blow! Why, that was something which had been known since ancient times. And throughout history it had always been achieved by surprise. Did not the art of battle, tactics, consist in taking the enemy by surprise and stunning him, while protecting one's own forces against a similar surprise attack?

These ideas are not new. They can be found in books.

But in the course of the war I discovered them anew after much and frequently painful thought, after the experience of a victory and a defeat. I had had a faint inkling of these ideas before, but now the secret of warfare had become clear to me!

At least, I thought so.

That same day, however, only a few hours later, the enemy showed me that I was still a long way from understanding everything; he showed me that there were other laws of warfare as well. And in war, as you know, the proofs are not like those in logic or mathematics. In war, the proofs are demonstrated in blood.

8

Here is what the men of Donskikh's platoon told me when they returned from the scene of action.

On that day, October 22, the enemy forces facing our battalion brought up artillery and stores along the road they had captured. At the same time they began to move again along the other road, where Donskikh's ambush had checked them two days earlier.

This time the Germans advanced more warily, on foot and in open order, firing from their tommy-guns into the roadside woods and bushes. The empty lorries moved alongside the soldiers in bottom gear.

Here, too, Donskikh's platoon met the Germans with a volley. But the enemy was prepared for this now. Dropping to the ground immediately, then advancing in short rushes, the Germans began to envelop the platoon.

At this point our plan was put into action. The time had come to feign a panic, to flee in disorder in all directions. This was done.

On catching sight of our fleeing men, the Germans shouted, "The Russians are running! Forward!" And they gave chase. As had been planned in advance, our men ran on, keeping close to the road. The German drivers started up and the soldiers scrambled into the moving lorries. Standing up in the trucks the Nazis fired as they went along, chasing our men in comfort.

The platoon disappeared into a ravine and the first group of men dropped down quickly behind bushes and hummocks. The lorries came on. Excited by the chase, the Germans were firing at random, streaking the air with tracer bullets.

And suddenly a volley came from the flank accompanied by enfilading fire from light machine-guns. Do you know what enfilading fire is like? At close quarters, and struck unexpectedly, it means certain death. The dead piled up. Shrieks filled the air. The drivers were either shot or jumped out of their vehicles without even braking. The lorries crashed into one another. And from the flank volley followed volley.

Stunned, in the grip of panic fear, the Germans jumped from the lorries and stampeded like a herd. Volley after volley poured into their backs.

And suddenly, from the other side, where they had hoped to find cover behind their trucks, death struck them again square in the face. Again a volley and again the enfilading fire of light machine-guns.

It was here that something I had not foreseen took place. The second blow, the second surprise, seemed to bring the enemy to his senses. The Germans did the only possible thing that could save them from annihilation. In a howling, maniacal wave they rushed forward, towards the firing, straight at our ambush.

The Germans had no bayonets. They had been trained to go into the attack with sub-machine guns pressed against their stomachs instead of rifles with bayonets fixed. Whether it was despair that gave them a sort of courage, or whether their commander had them well in hand at the critical moment, the fact remains that the Germans seemed suddenly to remember what they had been taught and charged forward against our thin line, sending out long gleaming streamers of tracer bullets in front of them.

In a moment the tables were turned. A simple rule of warfare began to assert itself—the rule of numbers, the rule of numerical and fire superiority. Over two hundred infuriated men, burning to kill, bore down on our men. And we had only a handful there, half a platoon, twenty-five men.

As I realized later, there was a mistake in the very planning of the battle. In fighting against superior forces you must not try to encircle the enemy. This was a bitter lesson.

What could Donskikh do? In terrible moments like this courage either deserts a man altogether or wells up afresh and gives him superhuman strength.

Donskikh ordered a withdrawal at the double to the near-by woods. He himself remained with the light machine-gun section he had detailed to cover the retreat.

The Germans drew closer, firing as they came on. But Donskikh was using his machine-gun very well, bowling them over one after the other as he blocked the gap that was their shortest line of pursuit. He was hit several times, but continued to fire without even noticing that he was bleeding.

Behind Donskikh another of our machine-guns began tacking away. Volkov, the platoon commander's aide, was now covering the lieutenant's retreat. Donskikh made a spurt towards his men, but another bullet hit him and he fell. Meanwhile, Volkov kept firing away in short but frequent bursts, keeping the Germans from getting to the lieutenant. Some of our men crawled up to him and dragged him away into the woods. There they bandaged seven bullet wounds they found on him. As for Sergeant Volkov, taciturn, stern in training and savage in action, he was killed at his gun.

9

That was how the Germans got control of no-man's-land on our sector.

It's not my job—a mere battalion commander—to explain the general operative situation around Moscow or even in the Volokolamsk area alone.

All the same, I may as well break the rule for once and outline it for you. Later, while examining the documents on the operations of Panfilov's Division, I read several communiqués issued by General Rokossovsky's Army, which was holding the Volokolamsk District. The communiqué for October 22 reads:

"By evening today the enemy had completed the concentration of his main forces on the left flank of our army and of an auxiliary group against the centre of the army."

Against the centre of the army.... In those days that was our battalion and our two neighbouring battalions with the artillery attached to us.

OCTOBER TWENTY-THIRD

1

On October 23, with the first faint glimmer of light, a German artillery spotter flew over our position. The wings of this type of plane sloped back like a mosquito's. The Red Army men nicknamed it the "Humpback." Later we got used to the "Humpbacks," and learned to bring them down; in turn they learned to respect us and kept their distance! But that morning's "Humpback" was the very first we had seen.

It circled around carelessly under the low autumn clouds, sometimes climbing into the grey ceiling, sometimes spiralling down with the engine cut out to look us over at close quarters.

There were no anti-aircraft weapons in the battalion. I've already told you that Panfilov had transferred our anti-aircraft machine-guns to the left flank of the Division, where the enemy had attacked with both tanks and aircraft. At that time we did not know that aircraft could be brought down by volleys of rifle fire. It's simple enough, once you know about it, like many other tricks we learned later.

The men were all watching the "Humpback." I remember the moment when the plane climbed steeply, took cover for an instant behind the clouds, then dived out again, and suddenly everything round about began to roar.

Pillars of earth rose from the field in a burst of flame. The first clouds had still not settled, we could still see the clods of earth that had been torn from the frozen ground slowly falling, when new pillars rose alongside.

By the sound of the shells and the nature of the explosions I could tell that the barrage was from guns of different calibre and from mortars. I glanced at my watch. It was two minutes past nine.

I went into our staff dug-out, which was hidden in the woods, and after getting the reports from my company commanders I rang up the Regimental Commander. I reported that at nine o'clock the enemy had begun an intense artillery bombardment of the forward fringe along the battalion's whole front. In reply I was informed that the battalion on our right was being bombarded in the same way.

2

It was clear that this barrage was the preliminary to an attack.

At moments like this everyone's nerves are always strained to the limit. Your ears catch each of the incessant blows that thud hollowly on the ground and your body feels the logs of the dug-out shake. When one lands near by, lumps of frozen earth shower down from the roof and clatter on the floor and table. But the tensest moment of all is when there is a sudden silence. Everyone keeps quiet, waiting for the next crash. It does not come.... That means.... But again the boom, boom begins.... And once more there is roaring and howling, the logs tremble, and again you wait for the most formidable thing of all—silence.

The Germans are full of tricks. That day they played on our nerves, on several occasions letting up their barrage for two or three minutes and then pounding away at us again. It was almost unendurable. If only they would attack!

But half an hour passed, then an hour and another hour, and still the barrage went on. I had been a gunner myself until a short time before and it was hard for me to believe that concentrated fire from all types of ordnance simultaneously could be carried on for so many hours against ordinary field works where there was not a single concrete structure. The Germans were firing trainloads of shells at us, everything they had brought up from the rear when they had halted, and they were combing the ground thoroughly, reckoning that they would pulverize our defences and smash us so that their infantry would be able to finish the job off in one spurt.

From time to time I spoke to the company commanders over the telephone. They reported that they had been unable to locate a concentration of German infantry anywhere.

There were frequent disconnections. Shell splinters cut the lines, but our signallers quickly traced and repaired them under fire.

In the afternoon, when the line was cut for the nth time, I followed the telephonist out of the dug-out to have a look at what was going on outside.

Shells were landing in the woods, too. Something roared through the tops of the trees. A tree splintered with a terrific crash, and branches and twigs came showering down. I felt like rushing back underground. But, getting a grip on myself, I walked over to the edge of the woods. The "Humpback" was still circling overhead. In the snow-covered field, now pitted with craters and strewn with dirt, thick black pillars of earth were still shooting up here and there. Sometimes they were short, with a reddish flash, when a mortar shell landed with its horrible wail; sometimes they rose as high as the tree tops when a heavy shell burst.

After a few moments my nerves grew accustomed to the din. The instinctive, involuntary trembling stopped. My ears heard the thuds more calmly. And suddenly there came a lull: utter silence. Once more my nerves felt the strain. Then there was a sharp thunderclap overhead, followed by a shrill, penetrating whistle that made my flesh creep. Another sharp clap in the sky followed by a shrill whistling. That is how shrapnel bursts. I pressed close against a tree and found that I was shaking disgustingly again.

After a few minutes' lull the Germans had changed their shell combination, the combination of explosions, sounds and visual effects. They were now sending over shrapnel and fragmentation shells, that burst just above the ground with a terrifying crash and flame. To the soldier sheltering in his foxhole, such shells are almost harmless—physically, that is, but the Germans were trying to crush our spirits; they were bombarding the soldiers' morale. During those moments, hugging the tree, I watched and understood, I learned from the enemy.

Then high-explosive shells began to burst in the field again, raising black tornadoes of earth mixed with dense clouds of smoke like coal dust.

A heavy crash sent up into the air some long logs that had been buried under a mound of earth until then. At that moment, of course, the German observer pilot overhead was jubilant.

But I, too, smiled maliciously. Our ruse had worked. For hours on end the enemy had been pounding away at the sham defences.

Like mushrooms sheltered by the overhanging bank and buried under the newly-fallen snow through which we had purposely trodden paths, the dummy dug-outs stretched in a fairly noticeable line along the river.

The real dug-outs, where the men were sheltered, had been built nearer the river, as you know, in the slope of the bank, and were roofed over with three or four layers of heavy logs.

The Germans not only conducted aimed fire, but also blanketed the whole area along the bank. But in order to do much damage the shells would have had to land in the comparatively weak slope of the wall and not on the heavy roofing. As you know, our dug-outs were perforce widely scattered, and the battalion sustained but few casualties.

3

Around four o'clock in the afternoon the enemy greatly intensified his shelling in No. 2 Company's sector, near the village of Novlyanskoye, through which the Sereda-Volokolamsk road ran.

I spotted this at once by the sound and the concussion, and called up Sevryukov, No. 2 Company Commander.

"He's not here. . . ."

I recognized the voice of one of the runners, the little Tatar, Muratov.

"Where is he?"

"He's crawled out to the observation post. . . ."

"And why aren't you with him?"

"He went alone so as it shouldn't be so noticeable. He knows his tactics, Comrade Battalion Commander."

Muratov spoke jauntily. At such times you get to be particularly sensitive to the men's very tone of voice. You can read it like a field report.

I was called over to another telephone. Sevryukov was on the line.

"Comrade Battalion Commander?"

"Yes. Where are you? Where are you speaking from?"

"I'm at the artillery observation post.... I'm having a look round with the gunner's field-glasses.... Terribly interesting, Comrade Battalion Commander...."

Even now, under fire, his habitual equanimity and leisurely way of talking had not deserted him. I spurred him on with questions.

"What's interesting? What can you see?"

"The Germans are concentrating along the edge of the woods.... The place is swarming with them, Comrade Battalion Commander. An officer's come out and is looking at us through his field-glasses."

"How many of them are there?"

"At a guess it would be about a battalion. I think, Comrade Battalion Commander, that we ought to—"

"What's there to think about? Call up Kukhtarenko. And make it snappy!"

"That's exactly what I was thinking, Comrade Battalion Commander...."

Sevryukov's slow ways had often irritated me. All the same I would not have wanted anyone else in his place. Already that day he had crawled over that nerve-racking field more than once to visit the trenches and the observers.

Lieutenant Kukhtarenko, the artillery observer, came to the telephone.

The eight guns attached to our battalion were concealed in the woods, and had not fired the whole day so as not to give away their position before the decisive moment. That moment was approaching. The fringe of the wood where the Germans were concentrating for the attack had been targeted earlier, as had the whole line in front of the battalion's sector. My plan was to open up with the guns only when the enemy shock group was ready for the assault, and then to come down on them like a ton of bricks, stunning them, dispersing them and spoiling their attack.

My impulse was to order all guns to open fire at the enemy concentration, but first it was necessary to fire a few ranging shots to correct the aim, see where they fell and make adjustments for the wind, the atmospheric pressure, the settling of the ground under the guns, and so on.

This would take very little time, only a few minutes.

But I think you remember Panfilov's riddle about time.

Do you know what can happen in war in the course of two or three minutes?

4

After giving my orders I still held on to the telephone, on the artillery line. I could hear the orders given to the gun position officer.

"Gun crews, fall in! Load and report!"

Then Kukhtarenko, the eye of the guns hidden in the woods, gave the target. I heard a voice repeat it. After that the guns were swung slowly round. But time was passing, time was passing....

At last I heard:

"Ready!"

And immediately after that, Kukhtarenko's command: "Two rounds, running fire!"

Again there was silence, no report was made, while the seconds flitted past.... Apparently something was not ready yet. Faster, faster, the devil take you! And suddenly this very word came over the wire.

Kukhtarenko had shouted:

"Faster!"

"Kukhtarenko, what's going on over there?" I put in.

"The Germans are getting ready, Comrade Battalion Commander. They're putting on their belts and helmets."

Then he shouted:

"Gun Position Officer!"

"Here!"

"Make it snappy!"

"Just coming! Shot one.... Shot two...."

Among the incessant explosions that were beating dully against my ear-drums, I could not distinguish the sound of our shells. But they had been fired. They were on the way—as yet only ranging shells, as yet only two. Kukhtarenko was at that moment watching the explosion. Were they far from the target? They might even have found the target at once. After all, such things do happen!

No! Kukhtarenko was making a correction:

"Target zero plus one.... Right, zero...."

And suddenly there was a terrific crash in the ear-piece of the receiver I was holding and the sentence broke off.

"Kukhtarenko!"

No reply.

"Kukhtarenko!"

Silence.... To the right zero.... Zero nine? Zero three? Or could it be zero zero three?

We had lots of shells and eight guns, but at the very moment when they were needed most of all a cursed chance of battle had blinded them.

An artillery lineman had already run out to the line, but time was passing.

It was not a break in the wire, however. The misfortune proved more serious.

I was called to another telephone. Muratov, the little soldier who had answered me in such high spirits a few moments earlier, was calling me from the command post of No. 2 Company. This time his voice sounded as if he were at a loss.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, the company commander has been wounded."

"Where? Seriously?"

"I don't know really. They haven't brought him in yet.... There are others over there—killed or wounded, I don't know."

"Where, 'over there'?"

"At the observation post.... Everyone's gone from here—to bring in the commander and the others.... They left me....Told me to call you up."

"But what... happened... over there, at the observation post?" I had to force myself to say this, knowing in advance that some catastrophe had happened.

"Direct hit...."

I said nothing. After a moment's silence, Muratov asked plaintively:

"Where am I to go now, Comrade Battalion Commander? Who will we be with now?"

I could sense the orphaned feeling of the soldier who had been left without his commander....

At any moment now the terrific din would be replaced by a terrifying silence. At any moment now the German infantry that had concentrated for the attack would come across the river. And the observation post was smashed, the guns had been blinded, and the company had no commander.

"Get your runners together," I said. "Let them pass the word through the platoons that Lieutenant Sevryukov has been wounded and that the Battalion Commander is coming out to Company Headquarters in his place. I'll be with you in a moment."

I hung up the receiver and ordered Chief-of-Staff Rakhimov:

"Get in touch with Krayev immediately. Tell him to report to me to take over command of No. 2 Company."

Then I shouted:

"Sinchenko! My horse!"

5

We galloped across the field, I in front on Lysanka and Sinchenko following. Lysanka's thin, translucent ears stood up like a cat's. I drove her straight ahead, holding the reins tight and not allowing her to shy at the explosions.

In my mind I kept drumming: "Faster! Faster! Anything but silence! If only I can get there in time!"

On the way we met an army cart dashing towards us from the direction of Novlyanskoye. The driver was whipping up the horses. A dark stream of blood was flowing down the flank of one of them.

"Halt!"

The driver did not rein in immediately.

"Halt!"

I caught sight of Kukhtarenko on the back seat. His dead-white face was spattered with dirt. Across his forehead was a recent scratch, swollen and bordered with congealed blood. His field-glasses were bobbing up and down against his clay-smeared great-coat.

"Kukhtarenko, where are you going?"

"To ... to ..." he stuttered without being able to get the words out. "To the gun position, Comrade Battalion Commander...."

"What for?"

"The observation post...."

"I know! I'm asking you what for? Are you running? Go back!"

"Comrade Battalion Commander, I...."

"Turn back!"

Kukhtarenko stared at me with startled yet corpse-like eyes, in which was frozen the horror of what he had been through.

And suddenly under the imperative gaze of his commander, Kukhtarenko's eyes changed just as if someone inside him had transformed them. Jumping up he shouted even more furiously than I had:

"Turn back!"

And then he let out a string of curses.

I dashed off towards the village. Behind me, ignoring the road, tossing the cart madly, the pair of artillery horses galloped heavily.

The church served as a dressing-station. Behind the churchyard wall, taking shelter from the bombardment, was the battalion cook-house. Lieutenant Ponomaryov, commander of the headquarters platoon, snapped to attention on catching sight of me.

"Ponomaryov, is your telephone working?"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Where is it?"

"The telephone's there, Comrade Battalion Commander, in the guardroom."

I estimated that it was probably a hundred and fifty yards from the belfry to the guardroom.

"Have you any cable?"

Upon hearing that they had I ordered:

"Have the telephone moved to the belfry immediately! At the double! Every second is precious, Ponomaryov!"

I ran up the stone steps and into the church. The smell of blood struck my nostrils. Wounded men were lying on ground-sheets spread on straw.

"Comrade Battalion Commander. . . ."

It was Sevryukov who was calling me in a feeble voice. Walking over quickly, I took up his strangely heavy, yellowish wrists.

"Forgive me, Sevryukov. . . . I can't stop now. . . ."

But he would not let me go. His elderly face with the neatly clipped grey temples and the stubble just beginning to show had grown gaunt and bloodless.

"Who's taking my place, Comrade Battalion Commander?"

"I am, Sevryukov.... Forgive me, but I can't stay any longer."

I pressed his limp hands and dropped them. Sevryukov looked after me with a pathetic smile.

The telephonist had run up to the tower with a telephone set, leaving a thin trail of wire behind him.

I was stopped on the way by Krasnenko, our doctor.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, what's the situation?"

"Look after your own job. Do your dressings and get the wounded out of here quickly!"

"Quickly?" he echoed in alarm.

I flared up.

"If ever I see your face looking like that again at the mere sound of the word 'quickly,' I'll deal with you as I would with a coward! Understand? Now, carry on...."

I climbed the spiral staircase to the belfry. Kukhtarenko was already there. He was crouching behind the stone balustrade and peering through his field-glasses. The telephonist was attaching the wire to the telephone.

"How much right of zero?" I asked.

Kukhtarenko stared at me blankly for a moment, and then realized what I meant.

"Zero five," he said.

I turned to the telephonist.

"Will you be through soon?"

"Right now, Comrade Battalion Commander."

Kukhtarenko held out the glasses to me. Adjusting them, I caught sight of the jagged edge of the woods and then, lowering them, I suddenly saw as clearly as if they were only fifty paces away—the Germans. They were standing easy, but were already in formation. I could make out various units: groups—evidently platoons—separated by short intervals were lined up with one section in front and two echeloned behind. The officers had put on their helmets and unfastened their revolver holsters, which the Germans—I noticed this for the first time—wear on the left and towards the front. So here they were, the army that was heading for Moscow, the professional victors! At this very moment they were about to ford the river.

6

"Ready!" said the telephonist. "We're through, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Call the gun position. . . ."

And then, at last, at long last, the command was given and the interrupted sentence completed.

"Elevation plus one! Five degrees right of zero, two rounds rapid!"

I handed the glasses back to Kukhtarenko.

Now I fixed my eyes on the fringe of the woods, no longer able to make out the Germans, waiting impatiently for the explosions. There was a flash among the trees, followed by two wisps of smoke. I dared not believe it, but it seemed to me that we had scored a hit.

"Right on the target!" Kukhtarenko exclaimed as he lowered the glasses. His grimy face with the swollen scratch was beaming. "Now we'll. . . ."

Without waiting for him to finish I snatched up the receiver and gave the order:

"All guns—eight rounds shrapnel—rapid fire!"

Impulsively, with an expression of pride, Kukhtarenko handed me the glasses.

I looked through them. Evidently the ranging shells had wounded someone. In one spot several Germans were standing with their backs to us, bending over someone. But the troops were still standing in formation.

Now then, pray to your God! Through the din and the roar which our ears had already ceased to take note of, we heard the boom of our guns. Leaning forward over the balustrade and peering through the glasses at the edge of the wood where the Germans were concentrated, I suddenly saw flames flare up, showers of earth rise into the air, trees crash to the ground and tommy-guns and helmets among the flying debris.

Suddenly Kukhtarenko tugged me hard.

"Lie down!" he yelled.

We had been spotted. With a deafening, sickening drone the "Humpback" flew past the belfry. The pilot opened up at us with his machine-gun. Several bullets hit a pillar, clipping it. The plane passed so close that I could actually see the furious face of the pilot turned towards us. For a moment we stared into each other's eyes. I knew that I ought to drop and lie flat, but I could not force myself to lie down in front of a German. Pulling out my revolver and fixing my eyes on the aircraft I kept pressing the trigger until the magazine was empty.

The plane made off, but guns began to fire at the belfry. One shell hit the thick brick wall below us. Fine brick-dust filled the air and grit got between our teeth. And yet I felt as if the enemy shells were not real, as if I were seeing them in the cinema, bursting on the screen close by, but in another world—not like our shells. Our shells crushed and shredded the bodies of the enemy.

Once again the "Humpback" flew past. Again the machine-gun rattled. I took cover behind a stone pillar. The telephonist groaned.

"Where'd it get you? Can you get down yourself?"

"I'll manage to, Comrade Battalion Commander."

Taking up the receiver, I called Ponomaryov.

"The telephonist has been wounded. Send another man up to the belfry."

Even before I had finished what I was saying, I noticed how strangely loud my voice sounded.

Everything had grown quiet. A terrifying silence had set in, a silence that made the ear-drums throb. At long intervals from far, far off in the rear I could hear the faint boom of gun-fire. Our men were fighting there. It was to get through to them that the Germans were trying to drive a new spearhead through our line of defences.

I ordered Kukhtarenko:

"Direct the firing! Mow them down if they start anything."

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander."

I hurried down two steps at a time. Now I had to get to the company quickly.

7

Once more I mounted Lysanka and galloped through the village to the river. How quiet it was!...

Along the snow-sprinkled bank that was pitted here and there with yawning black shell craters, someone was running towards me with a rifle, crouching low. I spurred towards him. Muratov stopped short, for it was he, and stared at me with his black eyes.

"Get down, Comrade Battalion Commander, get down," he blurted out hurriedly.

"Where are you going?"

"To the platoon.... To tell them that Political Officer Boszhanov has taken over command of the company."

Then he added as if in justification:

"You were a long time coming, Comrade Battalion Commander, and he...."

"Very well. Carry on."

We each went our own way.

I halted Lysanka and dismounted at the dug-out housing Company H.Q. some fifty yards behind the front-line trenches faintly discernible because of the faint lines of the communication trenches leading to them.

Lysanka's hide was no longer twitching, her ears were no longer erect. Good girl! Today we had our baptism of fire together. I felt like petting her, but there was no time, no time! And she expected it, she understood. Throwing the reins to Sinchenko, who had come running up, I stroked her muzzle lightly. Lysanka nibbled softly at my fingers for an instant. I could see her moist eyes. I turned and quickly walked over to the frozen steps that led into the dug-out, shouting as I went:

"Sinchenko, get into the gully with Lysanka!"

In the dim light of the dug-out I could not make out Boszhanov immediately. Some men were sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall. They jumped up, blocking what light did come in through the slit in the sloping front wall. Still unable to distinguish the faces, I wondered what it was all about and why there were so many men here.

Boszhanov reported that he had taken over command from the wounded Sevryukov. He, Boszhanov, was Political Officer of the M.-G. Company; all day long he had been sprinting or crawling from one machine-gun post to another, speaking to the men of his company, scattered in separate fire points along the front due to the nature of our defences. He had hurried to the village of Novlyanskoye, to the sector held by No. 2 Company, as soon as the enemy had shifted his fire there half an hour back.

The first thing I asked him was:

"What's going on in front of the company's line? What's the enemy up to?"

"They're not moving at all, Comrade Battalion Commander."

By then my eyes had become accustomed to the gloom. In one corner stood Galliulin, looking as if he were holding up the log roofing with his bent head.

"Who are these men?" I asked. "What are they doing here?"

Boszhanov explained that, in expectation of an attack by the Germans, he had decided to transfer one machine-gun to the company command post and to keep it as a mobile reserve in order to parry a possible surprise attack.

"That's good!" I said.

Boszhanov was rather heavy in build, with a broad face (such types belonged to one of the Kazakh tribes known as "the judges" to distinguish them from the tribe of "warriors" who are slim and small-boned), but at the same time he was extremely lively and always "on the go," as the saying is. Now he was standing to attention and reporting briefly. By his eyes, his tight-pressed lips and his restrained, abrupt gestures you could see how tense he was inside. He had been through the Finnish War as a political officer and had been in action more than once. He had been awarded the "For Valour" medal, and had frequently expressed the desire to become a combatant officer. This wish was being granted now, in the threatening hour of battle.

Blokha was standing to attention near loaded machine-gun that had been set up at the embrasure. He would not sit down, though I had given them the "carry on," nor even lean against the wall. The expression on his face was extremely serious.

Restless Murin was lying beside the observer and peering through the slit in the front wall.

I walked over to them. Even though the unevenness of the bank and the anti-tank slope screened the river here and there, the opposite bank was clearly visible. Without field-glasses I could not make out the splintered and shattered trees in the area that had just been shelled by our guns. The only thing I could make out was some fir-trees lying on the snow. They now served to give us our bearings. It was from there that the Germans should appear at any moment now. Just let them show themselves! Kukhtarenko was in the belfry; the guns covered that strip; the machine-guns were trained that way, and our rifles were also levelled in that direction.

Silence, silence.... Nothing in sight....

The sharp blast of a single German gun roared. Involuntarily I strained my eyes, prepared to see running, green-clad figures. But at that very instant a sound like hundreds of hammers banging on sheet iron burst on my ears. The Germans were again battering our forward positions, firing at the church, where they had spotted our observer, battering our guns, whose positions were now known.

"Well, I suppose that means they won't try anything else now," muttered Blokha.

Everyone realized this. The first attack had been repulsed before it had begun, disrupted by the smashing blows of our artillery. The Germans hesitated to make a dash forward under fire direct from their starting point. But the day was not yet over. I glanced at my watch. It was five minutes past three and the seventh hour of the barrage.

Calling up Battalion Headquarters I gave orders for the guns and observers to remain where they were and to send another artillery observer to the church with a spare telephone so that it would be possible to re-establish the observation post on the belfry in case of a direct hit. Then I ordered the officers and men of the headquarters platoon to help the stretcher-bearers transfer the wounded quickly from the church through the gully to the woods.

"Krayev has come as you ordered," Rakhimov told me. "Shall I send him over?"

"No. Tell him to wait. I'll be back soon."

8

Before going back to headquarters I decided to visit the men in their foxholes. I left the dug-out and crouching down in a trench, looked round.... The sky was lighter. The edge of the sun was peeping through a break in the clouds across the river, its rays falling obliquely so that the dust-covered snow did not sparkle. In a couple of hours it would be dark.

Judging by the sound of the volleys and the concentration of the German fire I realized that there would be an attack, that it would come today, and that it would be somewhere round here, not far away. The last hour of this day of battle would not be one of bombardment and nothing more.

The enemy was lashing the forward fringe with guns and mortars of all calibres just as if he were giving vent to his rage. Some of the shells whistled through the air on their way to the pits where our guns were emplaced. Others fell closer. The black earth columns were springing up in the middle of the field less frequently than earlier. They were moving closer to the crest of the river-bank. Judging by the way the enemy had shifted fire they had spotted our hidden defence line. It had most likely been given away by the movement of our orderlies and officers.

Crouching down on a step of the communication trench I watched the shelling. I began to feel cold for I was not wearing my great-coat but a short padded jacket tightly belted.

Perhaps there was no sense in going over there, to the trenches. No sooner had this thought flashed through my mind than I realized that I was afraid. I felt as if a thousand claws had fastened into my jacket, as if a thousand pounds were holding me down where I was. I tore myself free of the claws, threw off the thousand pounds and ran headlong towards the bank.

During the exciting moments when I had been galloping over the fields and later in the belfry, I had not even noticed the shells. But here.... Just try and run that forty or fifty yards through heavy shell-fire, when one side of you is being seered with a hot air blast that almost knocks you over as you run and then you are straightened up by a sheet of white flame that flares up on your other side. Perhaps you'll try to describe it later—maybe you'll succeed. As for myself, let me say quite briefly that after I had taken a dozen steps the sweat was pouring down my back.

All the same I walked into the trench with the dignity befitting an officer.

"Good afternoon, soldier!"

"Good afternoon, Comrade Battalion Commander!"

How homely it was there after the open spaces, how comfortable in the dim pit covered over with heavy logs. I was in a trench made to accommodate one man, a foxhole.

To this day I remember the face of that man, remember his name. Write it down: Sudarushkin, a Russian soldier, peasant, collective farmer from around Alma-Ata. He was pale and serious. His cap—with the Red Army Star—had slipped over to one side. For almost eight hours he had been listening to the barrage that made the walls of his dug-out tremble and had brought earth showering down. All day long he had been peering through the embrasure at the river and the opposite bank, standing here in utter solitude.

I looked through the slit. There was a broad view. The open stretch of unsullied snow on the opposite bank was clearly visible. What could I tell the man? Everything was clear here: as soon as they showed up he had to take aim and kill them. If we did not kill them, they would kill us. A loaded rifle lay at the firing position with its bayonet thrust out. Frozen bits of earth had fallen on it from the concussion of the barrage and a few specks had stuck to the grease.

"Sudarushkin, why is your rifle dirty?" I asked sternly.

"Beg pardon.... I'll wipe it off right away, Comrade Battalion Commander.... Everything'll be just so right away."

He promptly thrust his hand into his pocket for a rag. He felt good at being pulled up by me at this moment, just as if everything were normal. He felt surer of himself and calmer under the firm hand of his commander. After rubbing the dust from the bolt he looked at me as if to ask: "Pitch into me again; find something else wrong; stay awhile!"

Ekh, Sudarushkin, if only you knew how much I wanted to stay, how I hated to jump outside where hell had broken loose. Once again the claws fastened themselves into me; once again I was held down by a weight. I tried to find something wrong myself so as to be able to stay another minute. But you kept everything in order, Sudarushkin—even the cartridges were not lying on the dirt floor but in an open pouch. I looked around and I looked up. How pleasant it was to see over my head the rough-hewn fir trunks with the lopped-off branches. Sudarushkin looked up too and we both smiled, remembering how I had flung aside the flimsy roofing and made the men drag over heavy logs, speeding-up the shirkers.

"What do you think, Comrade Battalion Commander," Sudarushkin asked, "will they come over today?"

I would have liked to ask someone the same question myself, Sudarushkin. But I answered calmly:

"Yes, we'll test our rifles on them today."

There's no sense in making up pretty stories for the men. It's wrong to put them off with something vague: "Maybe, somehow, it'll pass over. . . ." A soldier is in the middle of a war. He must realize that he has come to the place where people are killed, that he has come there in order to kill the enemy.

"Put your cap on straight," I said. "Keep a sharp lookout. . . . Today we're going to lay them out near that little river."

And tearing myself free of the clutching claws again, I left him.

But mind you—this time it was easier to do it.

And take note of this too: there is absolutely no reason for a battalion commander to go running from trench to trench under fire. Such behaviour is uncalled for and unnecessary flirting with death. But I felt that a battalion commander might make an exception during his first battle. The men would then say: "Our commander is not a coward. He came to see us under shell-fire, when anyone else'd be scared stiff to crawl out to answer a call of nature."

I felt that it would be enough to do this once for everyone to remember, and for the soldiers to have confidence in me. That is a great thing in war. Can you, the commander, honestly say: I have faith in my men! Yes, you can, if the men have faith in you!

9

I must tell you about something else that rather surprised me when I was running from bunker to bunker. As I was running along I suddenly saw someone leap up from under the ground and rush towards me at full speed, bending over almost double. Who was it? What fool (I did not apply this term to myself, of course), what fool was running about in the front line under such fire? It was Tolstunov.... I don't think I've mentioned him yet, have I?

He had arrived shortly before the fighting and reported to me: "Regimental propaganda instructor. I'm going to work for a bit in your battalion." To be frank, I must say that I didn't take kindly to him at that time.

He had come to the battalion for an indefinite period. To tell the truth, I must admit that I took it as rather an encroachment on my authority. According to regulations, Tolstunov had no special rights in the battalion. He was not my commissar (at that time there were no battalion commissars), but.... On introducing himself he had said: "The Regimental Commissar sent me to your battalion." I did not answer him but I thought to myself: "Go ahead and busy yourself with whatever you have to. We'll see what you are worth in action."

And suddenly—this meeting on the river-bank.

"Battalion Commander!" (That's what Tolstunov always called me.) "Battalion Commander! What are you doing here! Lie down!"

"Lie down yourself!"

"I'll lie down, too."

We fell flat on the ground.

"Battalion Commander, why are you here?"

"And why are you here?"

"Routine duty...." His brown eyes were smiling. Devil take it—had he perhaps guessed my thoughts about him?

"Routine duty?"

"Yes. The men cheer up when an officer drops in to see them. They think that once a commander's there it can't be so terrible."

A shell burst close by. Both of us, battalion commander and propaganda instructor, hugged the ground as if we were trying to bury our heads. The blast swept over us.

Tolstunov raised his face, which had gone quite pale. Quite seriously he murmured:

"That way it doesn't scare you so much.... There's no need for you to run around here, Battalion Commander. For the time being we'll manage to take care of this business without you.... Well, all the best.... Glad to know you...."

Jumping to his feet, he waved his hand to me. The next instant we were running in opposite directions as fast as our feet could carry us. "Glad to know you...." So that's what he's like....

Yes, as a matter of fact, it was only at this point that our acquaintance really began.

I looked in at two or three more bunkers which Tolstunov had visited just before me. Yes, the men there were in better spirits and calmer.

That was how we commanders and political officers countered the "psychological" bombardment of the Germans. That was the course this action took, a battle in which, so far, not one soldier had fired a single shot.

Then I began to wonder if I hadn't really done enough running around.

From the river and the firing positions I turned to the woods. At the very edge a fragmentation shell burst overhead. I stopped short and fell prone. The fragments from shells of this type fly forward when they burst in the air. A pine tree shuddered. Snow sprinkled down. Fresh white scars appeared on the bark. My heart was thumping painfully.

Sinchenko, who had been following me along the edge of the woods all the time with Lysanka, brought the horse up to me immediately.

It was time, high time. Now for headquarters!

OCTOBER TWENTY-THIRD—AT THE CLOSE OF DAY

1

Krayev, who commanded the machine-gun company, was waiting for me at headquarters. Blood from his temple was streaming down his cheek and chin. He wiped it away irritably, smearing it over his angular face. But the crimson stream appeared again.

"What's the matter with you, Krayev?"

"The devil knows.... Got scratched...."

"Go to the dressing-station. Rakhimov, have the wounded men been taken out of the church?"

"They're being transferred, Comrade Battalion Commander. We've fixed up a dressing-station in the woods, in the forester's cabin."

"Good. You go there, Krayev...."

"I won't go...."

He said this stubbornly, sullenly.

"Think I'm going to let you go out like that," I shouted, "to scare the men? Fix yourself up to look like a soldier. Wash your face and get yourself bandaged. Then we'll talk. Sinchenko, bring Lieutenant Krayev a couple of cans of water."

With a wry smile, Krayev went out. All the same he did not get the chance to have his wound dressed.

Major Yelin, Regimental Commander, called me on the telephone.

"Is that you, Momysh-Uly? The enemy is attacking No. 6 Company around Krasnaya Gora. They've just broken through to the line of dug-outs. Go and help them. What have you got there, close to headquarters?"

Major Yelin, who had seen service in two wars, was a level-headed man with strong nerves. Now, too, his breathing was as even as ever when he uttered the words, "Go and help them."

The village of Krasnaya Gora was about one and a half miles to the right of Novlyanskoye. What had I got near headquarters? The sentries, a few telephonists who had just been relieved, and the headquarters platoon. I reported this to him.

"Send them to the assistance of No. 6 Company at the double. Keep in mind that a platoon under Lieutenant Islamkulov is on its way there from the north and warn the men not to fire at one another. Report to me as soon as it's done!"

I ordered Rakhimov to fall in the headquarters platoon and everyone around headquarters, after which I left the dug-out. In the woods it was already twilight. A little way off Krayev was washing himself. His homely face, with the heavy jaw and overhanging eyebrows, was already clean, but the water dripping from it was tinged with red.

"Krayev!"

He came running up. The stream of blood was flowing down his wet face again. He wiped it away with annoyance. I had intended appointing Krayev Commander of No. 2 Company. But.... He would have to take help to Krasnaya Gora.

A telephonist came dashing out of the dug-out.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, you're wanted on the telephone!"

"Who is it?"

"The Regimental Commander. He wants you right away."

This time Major Yelin spoke hurriedly and with agitation.

"Is that you, Momysh-Uly? Stay where you are! It's too late! The enemy has pushed through the breach, widening the gap. One group is on its way here, to Regimental Headquarters. I'm withdrawing. Another group, strength unknown, has turned in the direction of your flank. Turn your flank! Hold on! Then...."

And the voice broke off, the line went dead. There wasn't the slightest buzz in the receiver, not the slightest hum. Silence....

I put down the useless receiver and once again the silence struck me like a hammer blow on my nerves. It was not only the receiver that was silent; it had become quiet everywhere. The enemy had stopped his bombardment of our zone. What did it mean? Had the attack begun? Was it a rush by the infantry to breach the front held by No. 2 Company? No, the front had already been breached.

2

The front had already been breached. The Germans were already on our side of the river, were already advancing into the depth of our defences. They were on their way here too, to us. But not from the direction where their way had been barred by trenches, where our men were peering through the embrasures in readiness to meet them with bullets, where our guns and machine-guns had the whole terrain covered.

They were advancing on our flank and rear over a field with no prepared defences, where no front faced them.

For an instant I pictured to myself the men overtaken in their dark pits—the bunkers dug in the slope of the bank. There were no loop-holes at the back. Quickly I glanced at my watch.

It was a quarter to four.

Rakhimov, who so often understood things without a word, placed a map in front of me. Meeting his enquiring glance, I nodded silently.

"Around Krasnaya Gora?" he asked.

"Yes."

I gazed at the map, listening to the ticking of my watch, to the seconds fleeting past, feeling that this was no longer the time to be looking, that it was already time to act. But with an effort I took myself in hand and forced myself to stand there, bending over the map. If only you could describe that minute—that one minute given to me, the commander, in which to make a decision.

Surrender Novlyanskoye? Surrender the village that lay on the highway, that was so essential to the enemy, along which he could push straight ahead on trucks to the flank of our brother regiment fighting on the lateral road? It was not easy to answer myself: yes, surrender it! Otherwise I cannot save the battalion, and if I do save it.... Then we'll see who the road belongs to.

On the map—so far only on the map—was traced a new line going straight across the field and barring the way to the oncoming Germans. After informing Rakhimov of my decision and giving orders to move the heavy guns to the edge of the woods, to the new line of defence, I hurried out.

"Sinchenko!"

"Here!"

"My horse! Bring Rakhimov's too! For Krayev. Krayev, follow me!"

Once again we galloped towards No. 2 Company over the same field, silent now. The sky had cleared and the reddish rays of the low sun were in our eyes.

3

I sent Lysanka forward at a gallop. Suddenly red fireflies began to flicker overhead. I stood up in my stirrups for a second and glancing to one side caught sight of the Germans. They were marching along the field over which we were riding, approximately a thousand yards away from us. They were advancing in open order, with intervals of two or three paces between them. I knew that they wore greenish great-coats and helmets, but now, against the snow, the figures looked black. Up to tricks as usual, they were firing their tommy-guns as they marched, sending out thousands of tracer bullets to intimidate us.

At the company command post Galliulin had already slung his machine-gun on his back. A liaison man was running towards the river, to the flank of the battalion. Rakhimov had already called them up and given them their job.

Boszhanov was standing outside, seeing off the machine-gunners. Beside him were two runners: the short pock-marked Muratov and lanky Belovitsky, a student in a teachers' college before the war. Muratov was stamping his feet as if he were frozen.

Galloping up, I ordered:

"Boszhanov! You'll go with the machine-gunners! Repeat your orders!"

"To die," he said in a low tone, "but. . . ."

"To live! Your gun must not be silenced! Hold on till we turn our flank!. . ."

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander. The gun will hold the front till. . . ."

"Make your way through the gully. Act coolly. Bide your time; let them come up close. . . ."

I looked over the machine-gunners, glancing in turn at Murin, Dobryakov and Blokha, weighed down with belts of ammunition.

"At the double! Pin those swine to the ground, Comrades! Krayev, follow me! Sinchenko, follow me!"

Muratov came over to me.

"What about us, Comrade Battalion Commander?" he said imploringly.

"You go with the Political Officer! Observers, telephonists, follow the Political Officer!"

We dashed past Novlyanskoye through the open space between the river and the village to the flank of the battalion, but the orderly had not yet arrived. From here, the advancing Germans could not be seen as the hill was in their way, but the men had already come out of the end bunkers. Some of them were sitting in the communication trenches with only their heads above the ground; others had bunched together in groups. All of them were staring behind the trenches in the direction from which came the crackling of tommy-guns and random red dots of the tracers.

The red ball of the setting sun threw slanting rays.

Lieutenant Burnashev, a young platoon commander in No. 2 Company, ran a few paces in the direction of the firing and stopped short, standing there utterly at a loss, dumbfounded. That is something that can be sensed immediately in time of battle. He clenched his revolver so tightly that his fingers went white, but his arm hung down helplessly. Bewildered by the unexpectedness of the situation, Burnashev did not know what to do or what orders to give. He was at a loss for only a minute in all, perhaps, but during that minute—that horribly critical moment—the men had lost a commander. I did not see any N.C.O.'s. They were there, of course, but they did not show their presence in any way and were lost in the formless groups.

The military discipline, the army backbone, which I had always been able to distinguish at a single glance, had been crushed by the surprise. I realized that this was how battalions perished—yes, perished.

As yet no one was running, but.... One soldier, his eyes fixed on the flying lines of gleaming dots, was slowly moving, slowly edging away along the bank.

So far slowly.... So far alone.... But supposing he turned and ran, would not all of them go the same way?

Suddenly someone pointed authoritatively in the direction of this soldier who was edging away. Strange.... Who was in command here? Who had raised his hand with such determination? From the distance I recognized Tolstunov's smart figure. Immediately I breathed more easily. I no longer remembered my former opinion of him. Through my mind flashed the thought: good thing he's here.

That very moment I heard a loud shout:

"Where are you going? I'll show you how to run! I'll shoot, you coward! Not one step without an order!"

It was Private Bukreyev, a short, sharp-nosed Kazakh, company Party organizer, who had shouted. His rifle was levelled in a way that meant business.

Only then did I make out a few figures at various spots standing apart from the others: they seemed to have caught the pose of silent, concentrated determination from Tolstunov, who was in the centre. I saw that this was not the usual backbone of the platoon which I knew so well; but I saw, too, that these men were now holding together and cementing the platoon.

Another force had made itself felt here, that of the Communist Party.

Riding over, I shouted:

"Burnashev! Who's in charge here? Why so down in the mouth? Where are the section commanders?"

Burnashev started and flushed. He was ashamed of having been so put out. Hurriedly he shouted:

"Section commanders!"

In a loud voice I announced my decision briefly: to turn our flank after abandoning the village to the enemy. Then I ordered:

"No. 1 Section Commander! Turn out your men! Each man take up this position according to his number in the ranks. I will lead No. 1 section, Tolstunov No. 2, and Burnashev No. 3! Krayev will take over command of the company. Turn out the next platoon. You will join us. Blow up the bridge."

"Very well, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Tolstunov, join your section. . . ."

"Battalion Commander, I think. . . ."

"There's nothing to think about. . . . Keep at an interval of fifty paces from me. Don't fall behind! Don't bunch up. No. 1 section, attention! At the double, follow me!"

I started off for all I was worth up the rising ground, past the dark houses of the village whose windows were glowing with the reflection of the setting sun, over the crater-pitted field towards the woods. I could hear the footfalls behind me. The section was following me.

4

Half-way to the woods I caught sight of the Germans again. How much closer they had come, how they had grown—those black figures striding over the snow! They were making rapid progress: a hundred yards a minute. And we still had so much ground to cover, so far to run. . . . The edge of the woods was far, far away, almost at the world's end, it seemed. To the first trees it was almost five hundred yards.

With a sudden spurt I quickened my pace.

The Germans had spotted us. Red curves criss-crossed and cut the air in front and behind us, passing over our heads or expiring at our feet with a faint hiss.

The Germans were firing without taking aim as they came on, but their fire was heavy. Someone behind fell. A shrill, heart-rending cry reached my ears:

"Comrades. . . ."

I looked back and shouted:

"Follow me! He'll be picked up!"

The Germans, with the instinct of the pursuer—aha, the Russians are running!—also quickened their step. But there were the woods—a hundred paces away. And suddenly I felt with anguish that my breath was giving out. The convulsive spurt I had made half-way across had had its effect. The panting and the tramping of feet grew closer and closer behind me. The men were catching up with me. I had given orders not to bunch up, but they had done so anyway. Yes, a race like that, in view of the enemy, under tommy-gun fire, with the piercing shriek of a wounded man in one's ears, is not the same as regrouping on a flank during training

I filled my lungs with air.

"Section, halt!"

Do you understand? In that one instant, in that command in the one word "halt!" our entire past history was compressed—the history of a battalion of Panfilov's Division. Into it entered consciousness of duty and: "Thumbs in line with the seams of the trousers," and the ever-merciless: "do as you're told, don't answer back" that had become a habit, the second nature of a soldier; and the shooting of a coward before the troops on parade; and the night raid on Sereda, where the Germans had already been beaten once, where fear had been conquered.

But suppose the men had not halted, suppose they had dashed into the woods in headlong flight? In that case.... In that case that would have been the end of Battalion Commander Baurjan Momysh-Uly. Such is the law of our army—for the inglorious flight of his men, the inglorious commander must answer.

Breathing heavily, the men halted—halted, that was the important thing—around me.

"Section commander!"

"Here!"

"Lie down here! Fire! Right marker!"

"Here!"

"Come here! Lie down! Fire! Who's next to him?"

"Here!"

"Come here! Lie down! Fire! Spread out! Keep an interval of five paces between you! Don't lie down there, you! Move away a bit. Here! Fire!"

5

I had made a mistake. We should have lain down without firing, got ready, waited a few seconds at least for the mad pounding of our hearts to slacken, taken aim and then, at the command, have fired in volleys.

The men were firing at random with feverish speed and feverish inaccuracy. Still sending out showers of tracer bullets, the Germans were advancing on our thin line and none of them fell.

The unusually bright sun was casting its rays from the side and somewhat in front of them. The Germans no longer looked black and faceless. The sun picked out the colours. Under the greenish helmets gleamed beardless white faces on some of which eye-glasses glittered.

But why, why weren't they falling? Only at this point did I realize that actually the Germans were still a good way off—some three to four hundred yards. And we were firing away in a tearing hurry with our sights set at a hundred yards.

"Sights for two hundred and fifty!" I shouted above the din.

Tolstunov's section came running across the field in our tracks. From behind the Novlyanskoye houses No. 3 section was appearing.

Loaded waggons were hurrying out of the village, the drivers whipping up the horses....

The Germans were drawing nearer. One and then another fell in their ranks.... But among us, too, someone groaned.... The far end of the enemy ranks was hidden behind the houses. The enemy was already in Novlyanskoye. We had surrendered the village.

Meanwhile the Germans were coming on and on.... At any moment they would be given orders to advance at the double. I gauged the distance with a glance. They would crush us! Oh, if only you knew that sickening presentiment: they would crush us! The machine-gun! Where are you, Boszhanov, Murin, Blokha? Where is the machine-gun, the machine-gun?

Near by someone cried out:

"Oh, oh, I'm dying! Oh, oh...."

The cry of pain was nerve-racking and unmanning.

Everyone felt: in a minute the same thing will happen to me; in a minute a bullet will get me too; the blood will spurt from my body and I shall be crying out in my death agony. I said "everyone."... Yes, myself included.... Yes, those harrowing cries made me tremble as well. A cold wave swept over my body, depriving me of strength and robbing me of my will-power.

I looked in the direction from which the cries were coming. There he was, sitting on the snow without his cap. Fresh blood was smeared over his face. It was dripping from his chin on to his coat. The whites of his rolling eyes were horrible to see.

A little way off someone was lying with his face buried in the snow, clutching his head as if to keep himself from seeing and hearing. Was he dead? No. His hands were trembling. His semi-automatic rifle lay beside him on the snow. Who could it be? Jilbayev, a Kazakh, a man of my own tribe! He wasn't hurt, he was afraid, the swine! And only a moment before I, too, had wanted to bury my face in the snow, to press close to the ground and let come what may!

I rushed over to him.

"Jilbayev!"

He shuddered and wrenched his ashen face away from the snow.

"You bastard! Fire!"

He snatched up his gun, pressed it to his shoulder and hurriedly fired a burst.

"Take a careful aim," I said. "Aim to kill."

He looked up at me. His eyes were still terrified, but already sane. Quietly he replied, "I'll aim, *aksakal.*"

And the Germans were still coming on.... Marching confidently, quickly, erect, their tommy-guns crackling as they advanced and looking as if they were fitted with long needles of fire that reached all the way to us—that's what tracer bullets look like when they are fired continuously. I realized that the Germans were trying to deafen and blind us, to keep us from raising our heads and taking aim coolly. Where had Boszhanov got to? Where was the machine-gun? Why was it silent?

All this time the wounded man kept up his shrieking. I ran over to him. I saw his face streaming with blood, his wet, red hands.

"Lie down! Keep quiet!"

"Oh...."

"Keep quiet! Grit your teeth, stuff your mouth with your coat if it hurts, but keep quiet!"

And he—an honest soldier—fell silent.

At last, at long last, I heard the trill of the machine-gun.... A long burst: rat-tat-tat-tat.... Oho, how close Boszhanov had let them come! He had managed to hold out and not give himself away until the very last moment. And now, to make up for it, his machine-gun was mowing them down at point-blank range.

The first burst cut through the middle of the German line. What a clean sweep it made there! For the first time I heard the yells of the enemy. Later we learned from repeated experience that this is one of the peculiarities of the German army: whenever the fighting goes against them and they are unsuccessful in battle, their wounded yell at the top of their lungs under fire, calling for help. Our men almost never yell like that.

All the same, we had a thoroughly drilled force in front of us. A command in a foreign language rang out and the German line fell flat to a man.

Well, at last we could draw a deep breath.

A minute later Tolstunov came crawling over to me.

"What do you think, Battalion Commander? Shall it be 'Hurrah!'?"

I shook my head. In stories of the cheaper kind it's quite easy: "hurrah" and the Germans run. But war isn't like that.

All the same the "Hurrah!" of our charging soldiers did sound that evening. My battalion was not the only one on earth and I was not the only commander directing operations. The 'Hurrah' came from a quarter which surprised us as well as the Germans.

6

From the wedge of a wood slightly to the rear of the prone Germans a group of men had appeared. They were running in open order. In the rays of the setting sun we recognized the Red Army helmets and coats, the levelled Red Army bayonets. There weren't very many of them, forty or fifty in all. I guessed that this must be Lieutenant Islamkulov's platoon, which had been sent to the zone of the break-through.

Not we but the Germans would now feel what a blow from the flank and the rear was like. But you may be sure that they, too, knew all there was to know about turning a flank. The men at the end of the German line jumped up, and returning our fire as they ran, formed an arc.

"Battalion Commander!" Tolstunov exclaimed excitedly.

I nodded yes, and then shouted:

"Pass the word to stand by to charge!"

I did not recognize my own voice. It was muffled and hoarse. The words "stand by to charge" passed from man to man and the hearts of all stopped stockstill for an instant and then began to pound furiously.

The men running from the direction of the woods were coming our way. We could hear a faint "Hur-r-rah!" from there. Meanwhile the Germans were hurriedly re-forming. The line directly in front of us had thinned out, but the Germans managed to draw up two light machine-guns which had most likely been following somewhat behind the advancing formation. The machine-gun on the right, which was nearest my end of our line, had already opened fire. The unpleasant whizzing overhead became more frequent.

Meanwhile the firing from our ranks had died down. The men were lying flat on the ground clutching their rifles and waiting for the moment which had been in their thoughts from the day they had entered the service, the most terrifying moment in war—waiting for the word to attack.

I was amazed by this instinctive cessation of fire. That was wrong, altogether wrong! But there was no longer time to correct the mistake. We had to act quickly, quickly, while the enemy was still bewildered, before he set up his other machine-guns and brought them into action.

"Burnashev!" I shouted.

Lieutenant Burnashev, the platoon commander who had recently blushed with shame for his momentary confusion on the river-bank, was lying on my left some fifty yards from me. He immediately raised and lowered his hand to show that he had heard me.

"Burnashev, take the lead!"

A second passed.

No doubt you have read and heard about the mass heroism in the Red Army. Mass heroism is an absolute fact. But at the same time I want you to realize that there is no mass heroism without a leader, without someone who takes the first step. It is not easy to get up and rush into attack. And no one gets up if there is not one man who does so first, who leads the way and draws all the others after him.

Burnashev jumped up. His tense, eager silhouette was outlined against the sunset. In front of him, on a level with his shoulder, was the sharp black line of a bayonet. He had evidently snatched up a rifle from someone. His open mouth was moving. As he rose from the ground in obedience to a command that was not mine only but that of a beloved country, Burnashev shouted at the top of his lungs:

"For home and country! For Stalin! Forward!"

Before this I had often read newspaper reports of attacks. In these descriptions the men almost always went into attack with this cry on their lips. On paper it often looked too glib somehow, and I used to think that when our turn came, when we would have to make a bayonet charge, it would most likely be quite different. Something else would escape our lips, something savage and vicious, like "kill," or just simply "ah-ah-a-a-ah!" Yet in this great and terrible moment, after breaking loose from the thousands of threads that pin a man under fire down to the ground Burnashev was moving with the very same shout on his lips.

"For home and country! For Stalin! Hur-r-ah!"

Burnashev's voice broke off suddenly. He stumbled as if he had tripped over a wire stretched in his path, and fell. I felt that he must get up immediately, must begin to shout again and run on, while all those who had not yet risen, all of them with their bayonets levelled in front of them, would dash forward at the enemy together with him.

But Burnashev lay motionless, flinging out his arms. The men of the company were staring at the figure of the lieutenant sprawling on the snow. They were waiting for something.

Again a tense second. The men lay pressed to the ground.

And again someone dashed forward. Once again above the clatter of the machine-guns the battle cry rose over the field:

"For home and country! For Stalin! Forward!"

The voice was unnaturally shrill, and by the non-Russian accent and the lanky, short silhouette everyone recognized Private Bukeyev.

But he, too, crashed down before he had taken a couple of steps forward. The bullets probably got him in the chest or in the head but to us it seemed that he, too, like Lieutenant Burnashev, had had his legs cut from under him with a sharp scythe.

My body grew taut, my fingers scraped up the snow and clenched it tight. Again a second passed. The men were still not on their feet.

Two machine-guns were firing at us. In the dusk the long pulsating flames shooting forth from their muzzles were clearly visible. They dimly lighted up the machine-gunners kneeling behind the gun-shields, who were covering their reforming troops, keeping us from plunging into them with our bayonets, keeping us back with low fire.

The forty or fifty Red Army men who had chosen the proper moment to strike a blow at the rear of the enemy were drawing closer to the Germans, who had already formed a front and opened fire on that side too. Meanwhile we lay pinned to the ground, lay there dooming the handful of our daring comrades to death.

Every one of us, like me, was fully tensed, everybody wanted to go forward, to rise up from the ground but nobody did so.

What was happening? Were we going to lie there like cowards, were we going to let our comrades down? Surely there must be somebody who would make the forward dash for the third time and lead the company!

And suddenly I felt that everyone's gaze was fixed on me, that the strained attention of all was centred on me, the senior commander, the Battalion Commander, as if I were the focal point of the battle, although I lay on the outskirts; I felt that everyone was waiting for what the Battalion Commander would say, how he would act. Although I fully realized that I was acting insanely, I tried to rush forward in order to set an example.

But the moment I jumped up someone seized me by the shoulders and threw me down on the snow. It was Tolstunov. He let out a string of curses.

"Don't be a blasted fool! Don't you dare, Battalion Commander! I. . . ."

His pleasant, plain face had changed in an instant, and his expression was tense and set. He made a move to jump to his feet, but this time I grabbed him by the arm.

No, I did not want to lose Tolstunov too. I had already come to my senses and was again the Battalion Commander. The sensation I had felt just before I jumped up had become even keener. I felt as if every man of them were looking at me out of the corner of his eye. The men had of course noticed that their Battalion Commander had made a move to get up but had not done so, that the Senior Political Officer had also attempted to get up and had not done so either. Intuition, always more acute during a battle, told me that my abortive attempt had demoralized the men. If the Battalion Commander had tried to get up and had not done so, that meant it was impossible to get up.

A commander should know that in battle his every word, his every movement, the very expression of his face, is noticed by all and influences all. He should know that directing a battle means not only directing the fire and movements of the men but also their morale.

I had already come to my senses. It was not the business of the Battalion Commander, of course, to lead the company in a hand-to-hand fight with the enemy. I recalled all that we had been taught, recalled Panfilov's instructions: "You can't fight with the infantry's heads.... We must take care of the soldier. Protect him by action, with fire...."

I'm telling you this at length and in detail, but over there, on the field, the whole thing was a matter of seconds. During those seconds I, as all of us, was learning to fight, learning from the enemy.

I shouted:

"Rapid fire at the machine-gunners! Light machine-guns, long bursts at the machine-gunners! Pin them to the ground!"

The men understood. Now our bullets whistled over the heads of the firing Germans. One of our light machine-guns was close by. It, too, had ceased firing after I had given the order to Burnashev: "You lead!" Now one of the crew was hurriedly inserting a new disc. Tolstunov crawled over quickly. The men were firing feverishly. Then that machine-gun, too, set to work.

So! The German machine-gunners had fallen flat, taken cover, crouching behind the shields. Ha! We'd hit someone over there. One machine-gun sputtered and the long needles of flame stopped. Or perhaps they were only changing the belt? No; that was not so simple under fire.... Well.... This was the moment to give my order. But before I managed to do so, Tolstunov's fierce shout roared over the whole line:

"Communists!..."

But his appeal was addressed to everybody and not merely to the Communists. We saw Tolstunov scramble to his feet, holding a sub-machine gun, and dash forward firing and shouting as he ran. And once more, for the third time, the same words rang out over the field, a fierce and passionate cry:

"For home and country! For Stalin! Hur-r-rah!"

Tolstunov's voice was lost in the roar of all the other voices. The men had jumped up. Yelling fiercely, their faces distorted with rage, they rushed at the enemy, overtaking Tolstunov.

I just managed to see the huge, peculiarly-shaped butt of a light machine-gun wave in the air. Tolstunov had taken it by the muzzle, swung it over his head and was laying about him, using it like a club.

The Germans did not accept our challenge to a hand-to-hand encounter, did not wait for our bayonets. Their orderly ranks broke and they fled pell-mell before us.

Pursuing the enemy and killing those whom we managed to overtake, we (that is, our No. 2 Company and Lieutenant Islamkulov's platoon, which had begun this glorious counter-attack by striking at the rear of the enemy) burst into Novlyanskoye from two sides.

WE'RE HERE!

1

I entered the village immediately behind the men. The whole place was in an uproar of shots, shouts, and running footsteps as the Red Army men cleared the village of the Germans who had not managed to escape.

Abil Jilbayev ran past me carrying a semi-automatic rifle without so much as noticing me. The hem of his coat was tucked under his belt; the ear-pieces of his cap were unfastened and flapped like a calf's ears when it rushes across the field in a panic.

Puffing and panting, Jilbayev rushed over to a comrade, also a Kazakh, and pointed somewhere.

"Germans over there.... They're firing, the swine.... Let's go...."

They talked for a moment and then set off at a run. Jilbayev rushed straight ahead at full speed, boiling over with excitement, gripping his semi-automatic rifle. His comrade, however, moved off at a tangent, apparently intending to take the enemy from the flank.

Suddenly Jilbayev stopped short, turned to his comrade and shouted:

"Hey! Monarbek, how do you say it in German? *Hult*, is it?"

I burst out laughing. A few days earlier all the men in the battalion had received orders to learn a dozen German words: "halt," "surrender," "follow me," and so on. But I had been too busy to check up on this.

Monarbek stopped too. They yelled to each other in Kazakh:

"How did you say it?"

"Hult, eh?"

"That's right."

And off they went again. I called after them:

"That's not right, Jilbayev! It's *halt*!"

Jilbayev looked round, saw the Battalion Commander and ran off still faster, his ear-pieces flapping. I could not help laughing again.

I walked on, laughing and wondering at this unrestrained laughter. But it was simply the relief after the first strain of battle.

"Baurjan! What are you grinning about?"

Who was that? It was a long time since anyone had called me by my first name. Lieutenant Mukhametkul Islamkulov was coming towards me, grinning. I rushed up to him eagerly. He saluted.

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant! Circumstances have placed me here with a platoon under your command. Casualties are one man killed and four wounded. Platoon Commander Lieutenant Islamkulov."

I took his hand in both mine and pressed it hard. We had known one another for a long time in Alma-Ata. Islamkulov had been a journalist working on the newspaper *Sotsialistik Kazakhstan*. Now I gazed at his handsome bronzed face with an affection I had never felt before the war, admiring this tall, well-built, smiling officer.

Here, in the hour of trial, he had proved a true fighting man: courageous and clever. It is not so easy to creep up behind the enemy, wait for the proper moment, and when that moment comes to strike from behind in silence.

"Get your platoon in order," I said to him. "Then come to Headquarters. We'll have a talk there."

The fighting was over. The Germans who had managed to get away had waded across to the other side of the river, up to their waists or their chests in the icy water. Another group, which had been too far from the river, had dashed off in the direction of Krasnaya Gora with our men in hot pursuit. Rifle shots flashed in the twilight as solitary Germans who were overtaken tried to put up a resistance.

2

And suddenly, from the place across the river to which the more or less compact group of Germans had withdrawn, signal rockets rose into the air. They did not light up the banks. There was only a dim reflection of the fleeting coloured lights in the dark water.

Two green, an orange, a white, and then again two green rockets. Darkness, an interval, and then again six rockets rose in the same combination.

The Germans were undoubtedly sending information. But what was that information? Was it a report on what had happened? Or was it a call for reinforcements and an indication of a new attack?

From various points answering signals soared up.

I ran my eye along the horizon, which was slashed with fiery comets. It was painful to realize that the enemy had penetrated so deep and so far. We were in the very maw of the beast.

The rockets came from Tsvetki, Zhitakha and other villages across the river opposite the trenches we had to abandon when we reformed—here was a breach of a mile and a half in our front. On our bank, up the Rusa, rockets were flaring up over Krasnaya Gora. Somewhat obliquely and farther back, fireworks were soaring over Novoshchurino, where Regimental Headquarters had been located that morning. Farther, enveloping us ever more closely, rockets were rising over Yemelyanovo, over Lazarevo.... Then a dark strip of calm evening sky with no fireworks.... But the interval was strangely narrow. Turning my back on Krasnaya Gora I stared in perplexity. The rockets seemed to be rising right over the village of Sipunovo too. What could that mean? Captain Shilov's battalion was there. Sipunovo was his base.

Showering down sparks, the rockets faded and vanished.... Immediately everything was shrouded in darkness.

No, it could not be Sipunovo. Calculating the time and the nature of the break-through, I reckoned that the enemy could not have penetrated so far as that. The Germans were most likely up to their tricks here, too. They were probably trying to frighten us with rockets that had been secretly brought to our rear by their scouts beforehand. Yet it was absolutely essential for me to get to headquarters immediately and to establish contact from there with Captain Shilov. I had to find out the meaning of those strange rockets in his rear, had to send out a scouting party. If only Rakhimov would act, act, give orders without me! If only he would clear up, clear up as quickly as possible, the meaning of the puzzle over there near Sipunovo!

We were in a pretty tight squeeze even without that.... Almost all the roads that ran through Novlyanskoye had been seized by the enemy. If he transferred infantry here on lorries or at the double from various directions, everything would be turned topsy-turvy here at once. We would be assailed from the rear, and nothing could save my men, who were scattered over the field as they pursued their attack.

I found Krayev and ordered him to lead the company out of the village and dig-in across the field in the line from which we had charged the enemy. Then I set off for headquarters.

On the edge of the woods just in front of our Battalion Headquarters my eight guns were standing, screened by trees.

They had been brought here on my orders. Their dark muzzles looked out on the road that led from Novoshchurino. I sent for the artillery officer.

"Have you got the road covered?"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Let the Germans go by to Novlyanskoye if they should turn up."

"Let them pass?"

"Yes. Do you see the village?"

Some seven hundred yards in front of us stretched the wide main street of the village, shown up by the black silhouettes of the houses. Our men were withdrawing from there, calling to one another and finding their own sections and platoons as they went.

"I see it."

"Cover the street. Let the enemy get in. Then punch out point-blank with canister."

"Very well, Comrade Battalion Commander."

Again rockets began to rise over the horizon. The first rockets went up over Novoshchurino, while those in reply rose from all around. And again the coloured streamers slashed the sky far beyond the woods in the direction of Sipunovo.

What did it mean? I absolutely had to get to headquarters immediately!

3

I walked into the Staff dug-out. Everyone jumped up. Among the rest I noticed Islamkulov.

But someone in the corner, out of reach of the lamplight, remained seated, staring at the floor oblivious to all that was taking place around him. He was not wearing a cap with ear-pieces like all the rest of us, but a khaki cap with the red band of the infantry.

"Captain Shilov? Is that you?"

Leaning on the edge of the table he rose to his feet. Slowly he raised his hand to his cap.

I remember the first impression he made on me, that of a man who was suffering and struggling to control his suffering. What had happened to him? Why was he here?

"What's the matter with you, Captain Shilov?"

He did not answer.

"What's the matter with you?" I repeated. "What happened to your battalion?"

"The battalion...." One corner of his mouth twitched spasmodically. He swallowed. Then he blurted out: "The battalion has been routed."

He kept his eyes fixed on me, waiting for me to ask questions. I saw his eyes. Leaning heavily on the table, he did not avert his glance.

What was there to ask? "The battalion has been routed...." And you, Battalion Commander, ran? No; this was neither the time nor the place for such questions.

"The battalion has been routed...." Shilov was in my dug-out, in my headquarters... Which meant? Which meant that the front had been breached on our left as well.

Shilov sat down again, and once more lowered his head.

"Permit me to report," put in Rakhimov.

"Go ahead," I said.

4

Rakhimov unfolded a map. As he reported he pointed out the various places. Mechanically I followed his pencil, neatly sharpened as ever. In a level voice he told me the hour and minute of the catastrophe.

But I grasped things with difficulty, heard poorly. Everything seemed to be reaching me from a distance. "Without any artillery preparation, the enemy made a surprise attack on Captain Shilov's battalion. After that, breaking through at the village of Sipunovo. . . ."

I knew what had happened after that, it was what I had just experienced. The men had left the trenches. . . . Some of them were standing alone between their foxholes, others were standing together in two's and three's. . . . All of them were looking back in the direction from which came the sound of tommy-guns, from which stray red dots were flying. They were filled with dismay. Where could they hide? The Germans were in front of them and behind. . . . Another moment and . . . and the battalion had ceased to exist. . . .

Rakhimov went on with his report. The German columns that had, towards evening, broken through on either flank of the battalion, had apparently not yet joined up in the rear. Our cavalry patrols, which had been sent to the rear, had encountered enemy fire several times. But in some of the villages nobody bothered them: the Germans had by-passed these places. It was still possible to slip through these villages and along the country roads. Rakhimov pointed out the route on the map.

The former line of defence, the line of interlocked circles was gone. An eraser had wiped away the pencil line, leaving scarcely visible traces on the map's glossy surface.

The battalion's new front which was now marked on the map was curved like a horseshoe, the ends were hacked off and rested on empty space. No, not on empty space. We had neighbours. The neighbours on the right were the Germans; and the neighbours on the left were the Germans; behind, in our exposed rear, to which Rakhimov had transferred two machine-guns and where he had stationed outposts, there were also Germans.

Rakhimov reckoned that now it was dark the Germans would suspend hostilities. We were familiar with their procedure: sleeping at night and fighting in the day-time. They were scarcely likely to advance again before dawn. The narrow neck connecting the battalion with our main forces would most probably not be cut before dawn.

Rakhimov reported calmly, efficiently and briefly. This explicitness was something I valued very highly in him. He was exact even about what he did not know—about this he always said: I do not know. He did not know in what strength the enemy had broken through in two places; did not know the location of Regimental Headquarters, or whether it had been captured and no longer existed; he did not know to what place our forces were withdrawing. But he had established that there was a narrow passage leading there, to our main forces.

He had given preliminary orders without me. Ammunition, food supplies, stores and the dressing-station were all on wheels and the horses had been harnessed.

At the moment of crisis he had acted quickly and intelligently. He reported without a single nervous gesture, without the slightest shade of anxiety in his voice.

But I said nothing.

5

I had only to say "Yes," and the battalion, which had been got ready to move, would set off and slip out of the enemy clutches. But I said nothing.

Understand me. Two hours earlier the Regimental Commander, Major Yelin, had spoken to me over the telephone. I remembered the conversation word for word, remembered every hastily uttered, fragmentary sentence: "Is that you, Momysh-Uly? Stay where you are. It's too late! The enemy has pushed through.... One group is on its way here, to Regimental Headquarters. I'm withdrawing. Another group, strength unknown, has turned in the direction of your flank. Turn your flank! Hold on! Then—" And then the connection had broken off as if the voice had been snipped short with clippers.

"Then...." What then? Withdraw?

I'm ashamed to admit it, but for a moment I gave myself up to base self-deception. I tried to convince myself, to talk myself into believing: "But you heard, you did hear the next word too, not all of it, but the first syllable, the first letters: 'Then withdr....' "

Liar! Don't lie, don't squirm before your own conscience! Did you or did you not hear this? Did your superior officer order you to withdraw or have you no such orders?

Rakhimov was waiting. I had only to say, "Yes," and the battalion, which was all ready to move, would have set off and slipped out of the enemy's clutches. But I said nothing. I had no orders.

Might Major Yelin have said: "Withdraw?" Yes. After all he had informed me that he was withdrawing. But he might just as well not have said it. Two hours back the situation had been different. The front to the left of us had not been breached and no gap yawned there then.

But now? Where was he now, the Regimental Commander? He had said "I'm withdrawing." Where to? The line had been broken before he had managed to say where he was going, in what direction, by what road he was withdrawing the practically defenceless staff, or whether he was going by road at all. The Regimental Commander had been left without reserves. There was only one machine-gun at headquarters and only thirty or forty men in all, together with the Staff officers. Where were they? Were they still alive? Perhaps they were encircled somewhere and were fighting back. Or perhaps they were making their way through the forest in single file, constantly on the alert. Or perhaps they had got away to the right, to the battalions that had remained on that side of Krasnaya Gora.

Did the Regimental Commander know that our battalion was caught in a noose? If only he had been able he would most likely have ordered: "Take advantage of the darkness to withdraw and by morning take up positions in front of the enemy on a new sector as if you had risen from the ground!"

But there were no connections. We were cut off. Rakhimov was waiting. On the other side of the dug-out walls, in horseshoe formation, the battalion was waiting.

But I said nothing. I had no orders.

6

"Comrade Battalion Commander, you're wanted," said the telephonist.

"Who is it?"

"Lieutenant Krayev."

I took the receiver. I did not want to speak to anyone. A strange apathy held both my mind and my body captive.

Krayev reported that Novlyanskoye, which we had abandoned, had again been occupied by the enemy. According to the report of his observers, fourteen lorries carrying infantry had entered the village.

"Where from? Over what road?"

"From Novoshchurino."

Evidently Novoshchurino was a concentration point. From there the enemy's motorized infantry was being launched against us.

Someone came in. At any other time I would have looked round immediately.... But now I did not feel like moving my head, seeing anyone, hearing anything, having to reply.... Still holding the receiver, I snapped over my shoulder:

"See Rakhimov...."

Krayev continued his report, giving the details.

"They've settled down in the village, Comrade Battalion Commander. Lights have flared up in the houses. They're not blacking out the windows. They've driven several lorries down to the river. I think they're carrying pontoons."

Would the Germans actually have a new bridge ready this very night to replace the one we had blown up? It seemed that the German war machine had not shut off its engine for the night; it had gone on working.

"Can they see us?" I asked.

"No.... But they've set up outposts on our side. Most likely they've put machine-guns somewhere, too. I don't think they'll budge before morning, Comrade Battalion Commander."

As usual, Krayev spoke as if he were short of breath. He fell silent, but I could hear his breathing over the wire. He was waiting for something from me; he, too, wanted a word from me.

But what could I say, what ought I to say to him?

7

"Very well," I said, and hung up the receiver.

Shilov was still sitting in the corner, without changing his position, without stirring. Islamkulov was standing near the lamp, concentrated and serious.

"Where's Rakhimov?" I asked.

"He's gone out to see the scouts. They've brought in information...."

"Well, and what's up out there?"

"I don't know. To all appearances nothing out of the ordinary."

I stared at Islamkulov with a long, cheerless glance. I felt like asking, "Can you understand me, friend?" His black eyes, alert and intelligent, answered, "I understand."

"I think we'll get out, Baurjan," began Islamkulov, smiling.

He hadn't understood me.

"Have the goodness to keep your opinions to yourself," I answered curtly. "Comrade Lieutenant, I have not convened and do not intend to convene a council of war."

He sprang to attention.

"Excuse me, Comrade Senior Lieutenant.... May I leave?'"

It was not he who had to excuse himself but I. I weakened and in one glance betrayed my confusion, in one glance I begged: "Help me!" You're upset, Islamkulov, but it was not you that I was shouting at.

"Sit down," I suggested by way of amends.

8

Remember the old Kazakh saying: "Honour is stronger than death." On a hot July day, three months ago, in the village of Talgar, near Alma-Ata, I had given my first talk to the battalion, a few hundred men still dressed in civilian clothes—the men with rifles who were now lying in the snow on the frozen ground of the Moscow Region. I had quoted this saying to them at that time, this aphorism of war.

There, too, in Alma-Ata, General Panfilov had had a talk with me one night. Everyone not on duty had been asleep in the big brick building of Divisional Headquarters. But Panfilov had not been sleeping. At that late hour, tired, without his tunic and in a white sleeveless vest, with a towel over his arm, he had looked into the orderly room where I was on duty. "Be seated, Comrade Momysh-Uly, be seated." He, too, had sat down. The conversation I remember so well began. After several questions Panfilov had said thoughtfully: "No, Comrade Momysh-Uly, it won't be easy for you to command a battalion." That had hurt. I had flared up: "But I know how to die honourably, Comrade General." "Together with the battalion?" 'Together with the battalion!" he had burst out laughing. "Thanks for such a commander. You say so glibly: 'I shall die with my battalion.' There are hundreds of men in a battalion, Comrade Momysh-Uly. It would be far better to lead your battalion to repulse ten, twenty, thirty attacks—and bring it out intact! That's what the soldier will thank you for!"

And the last words I had heard from him only a few days earlier, words that had sounded like a commandment, spoke of the same thing: "Take care of the soldier. At this moment we have no other forces, no other soldiers here, near Moscow. If we lose these men, we'll have nothing to hold up the Germans with."

Why torture myself? Rakhimov had everything in readiness. Our stores and guns were on wheels. I had only to give the order to march and the battalion would move, the battalion would be saved.

I had received no orders, I had no wireless communication. But at a time like this, with the front shattered, with the Germans advancing towards Volokolamsk in two columns, infiltrating into the rear, capturing roads, cutting wires, disrupting communications, could I and did I have the right to wait for a liaison officer to come in and hand me an order?

And what if he could not get through, if he encountered Germans everywhere? What if he had been killed? What if he had lost his way?

I had a vision that I could not get rid of—I kept imagining that through the night I could hear Panfilov's call knocking at my brain. I could not rid myself of the feeling that I heard, or to put it more precisely, caught, sensed his voice calling to me from the distance and urging me, "Get out! Lead out the battalion! You're needed to cover Moscow!"

I imagined how happily he would meet us, shaking my hand and asking, "Is the battalion intact?"

"Yes, Comrade General!"

"The guns, the machine-guns?"

"We have them, Comrade General."

No: to hell with all these flights of fancy! It was nothing but mysticism and self-deception. A commander has no right to listen to mysterious whisperings. He must use his wits.

"You must fight with your brains," Panfilov had said.

9

I remembered every word Panfilov had uttered at our last meeting.

"Our line is like a fine-spun thread. It will not hold back the enemy."

"Be ready to pack up quickly, to move fast."

"What we have to do is to operate so that wherever the Germans break through they will be met by our troops."

I recalled Panfilov's "spiral spring."

You see, during that meeting at Captain Shilov's, Panfilov had given me an insight into his thoughts. He wanted me, a battalion commander, to grasp the essence of his—the Divisional Commander's—operative plan; amidst the changes that take place in the field, the shake-ups and buffeting of battle, he wanted me to act with intelligence and understanding, divining—and here this word is in place—what the man who was directing operations expected of me.

This was no mystical call, no flight of fancy, no self-deception.

What then was I waiting for? Enough of this self-tormenting. I had to shake off this cursed apathy. The men were waiting for me to say the word. I had to decide. I had to command.

10

Rakhimov came back.

"What's going out there?"

"A slight unpleasantness. Dolgorukovka has been taken by the enemy."

"Dolgorukovka?"

"Yes.... On the road that was clear. According to information a small group—about forty men, a platoon—has entered the village."

Rakhimov pointed out Dolgorukovka on the map. Across a narrow passage, like an elbow bend, faintly outlined with red dots, he had drawn a dark blue arc. The neck was corked up.

So.... The enemy was losing no time. They were continuing to advance. The German war machine had still not stopped for the night. It was working.

"I spoke to the scouts," continued Rakhimov. "Permit me to tell you what I think...."

"Go ahead."

Rakhimov said that in his opinion the nature of the terrain made it possible to do two things. We could move to within a mile of Dolgorukovka, turn into the fields and make a detour around the village through a gap between two patches of woodland, where there were no gullies and no tree stumps, and where the guns and carts could pass as easily as the infantry. Then, after making this detour, we could come out on the road again. We could of course wipe out the group at Dolgorukovka, but that could scarcely be done without noise. The enemy would prick up his ears at once....

"Who reconnoitred the terrain there?" I asked. "Tell him to come here at the double."

Opening the door, Rakhimov shouted to someone. Lieutenant Brudny came in.

11

Lieutenant Brudny! The man to whom I had shouted only a few days ago: "Coward! You have given up Moscow!" The man who had turned back towards the enemy when he had been driven out of the battalion and next morning brought back the weapons and papers of two Germans he had killed during the night, who had brought these back and put them down in front of me like his own lost and newly-found honour. As you most likely remember, I had appointed him second-in-command of the reconnaissance platoon.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Brudny reporting."

He stood in front of me, his eyes sparkling, in high spirits, flushed.

And I looked at him, shaken to the core. This was the man at whom I had shouted, "Coward! You have given up Moscow!" So that was how a man could retreat without orders, that was how it happened! Here both flights of fancy and hypnosis, and thoughts about the men, and logical calculations all led to one and the same thing: withdraw!

So that was how it happened! Then reason, too, was drawing me in that direction; reason, too, was in the service of fear.

I had no orders to withdraw and so to hell with reasoning! No; I was not right! Had not Panfilov repeatedly told us that always and under all circumstances a commander is in duty bound to think, to reason?

Once again I tried to picture the position of the Division after the German break-through, to picture Panfilov's actions, his plan of defence. "It is not the line that is important—what is important is the road," he had told me recently. The road through Novlyanskoye had been entrusted to us, to my battalion. Panfilov knew us, knew me. Perhaps at that very moment he was thinking: Momysh-Uly's battalion will not abandon the road, will not retreat without orders. Perhaps he counted on us at this very minute, when he, manoeuvring with small forces, was setting up barriers, shifting units in order to close the line in the deep rear.

But what if it was not so? What if Panfilov was short of forces to close the breach? What if he urgently and desperately needed our battalion? What if the order to withdraw had been sent, but the liaison officer had been unable to reach us? I did not know! There was no order—and that was that.

I had not betrayed by the least sign the wavering that had affected me these last moments. I alone knew about my mental struggles. In the battalion, I, as Battalion Commander, was the supreme authority. It is the commander who decides and who dictates decisions. I had decided.

12

"Well, Brudny," I said, "are you ready to lead the way? Did you reconnoitre the gaps?"

He answered boisterously:

"It's like shoeing a puppy for me, Comrade Battalion Commander.... I'll lead the way there and lead the way out.... We'll get past Dolgorukovka easily."

Suddenly Captain Shilov jumped up. For some time now he had been sitting with his head raised, listening:

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant.... There are a few of my men here with me. They ask you to put them in the vanguard when the battalion is breaking through...."

Again he spoke laconically and after he had finished closed his lips tight as if he were holding back the words that were ready to tumble out. But he did not utter a single word in an attempt to exonerate himself.

My answer was curt:

"I am not going to break through. I have no orders."

All maintained the silence that is required of them when a commander announces his decision.

With one sentence I had annulled Rakhimov's orders, which had been given without me, but his dry, emotionless face expressed nothing but attention. With his head slightly cocked, he was standing ready as ever to hear, understand, and carry out.

I went on:

"I intend to fight in encirclement...."

As I have already told you, Red Army regulations provide that the commander should speak of his unit in the first person, "I." The commander's "I" meant his soldiers. They would fight in encirclement.

"Tonight, Lieutenant Brudny, you will have to do some travelling amongst the Germans. You will go with Kurbatov."

On the map I pointed out ten or twelve villages and hamlets to any of which it was possible that Regimental Headquarters had shifted.

"If the Germans are in this village," I said to Brudny, "make your way to the next. If the Germans are there too, go farther. Your task is to avoid being caught, to find Regimental Headquarters, report the situation and return here with orders."

"Very well, Comrade Battalion Commander."

Brudny left the dug-out.

With an effort, Shilov walked over to the map.

"My guns are there," he said with difficulty.

"Where? Blown up?"

"No.... Abandoned in the woods.... Here...."

He made a pencil mark on the map.

"How many?"

"Six guns and four hundred shells."

"Look here, Captain," I said. "Don't you think we ought to try and get them out of there? Take my horses and take my men.... Will you go?"

Shilov smiled wryly.

"No, I'm afraid I can't manage to go anywhere now."

Turning round he raised the skirt of his coat. One leg of his breeches was slit right down and his boot-top cut open. The swollen leg was bandaged. Blood had seeped through the gauze and the trouser-leg was soaked in it.

"Were you looked after at the dressing-station?" I asked. "Is the bone all right?"

"The devil knows.... The men bandaged me.... They abandoned the guns"—for the first time, at last, a savage curse broke from Shilov's lips—"and brought me out...."

Without bending the knee of his injured leg, he sat down heavily on a stool.

"Sinchenko!" I shouted, "call for a stretcher! Make it snappy!"

For some time Shilov said nothing. Then he murmured:

"Here I sit, thinking about the battalion, and I can't make up my mind whether the rout of my battalion was inevitable or not. Yes, the men were badly trained...."

Once again he cursed, and then looking up at me continued with unexpected energy:

"Do you think everyone ran like sheep? No; two companies fought bravely. . . . And after all they did not abandon their commander; after all. . . ."

And again he pressed his lips together without finishing what he was saying.

The stretcher had been brought up to the dug-out. Leaning on Sinchenko, Shilov limped out with difficulty.

13

I gave orders to Islamkulov to lead his platoon out by flanking the village of Dolgorukovka.

This unit was not part of the battalion and I did not feel that I could keep back forty or fifty men when I knew that Panfilov was now straining every effort to close the road to the enemy who had broken through. At that moment I knew that, with his small forces, every unit, every platoon, meant something to Panfilov.

Turning red in the face, Islamkulov tried to object. He was eager to share our lot. But I allowed no arguments.

"Shall we withdraw to the woods?" asked Rakhimov. "Set up our defences on the fringe?"

"Yes."

Asking no further questions, Rakhimov took a piece of paper, quickly sketched the outline of the woods, and began to mark off sectors for each company.

I went out of the dug-out with Islamkulov.

It was dark and quiet. No guns were roaring, no battle raging near by. Over the black branches the stars shone.

"Go," I said, "they need you more over there."

"Baurjan . . ." he began irresolutely.

I passed over in silence his calling me by my first name, as it was a moment of parting. More boldly he repeated:

"Baurjan, if that's really so, if a single platoon is needed so badly over there, then a battalion.... Judge for yourself...."

"I can't, Islamkulov; I haven't the right. Go ahead!"

We did not kiss in parting. That is not the custom among our people.

14

In a few minutes Rakhimov had his rough plan ready: our patch of woods; the nearest villages; the nearest clearings; the roads. The woods were divided into company sectors. In the centre was the forester's log cabin, where the dressing-station had been set up. The cabin, as we knew, was big enough, and with my permission Rakhimov drew a flag there. To that place, the central point, we would transfer the battalion command post.

The plan was immediately retraced in a fair copy, four copies being made for the company commanders. Handing it to me to sign, Rakhimov said:

"We'll dig in without being seen tonight. I don't think they'll see us even in the morning."

I was really annoyed.

Ah, Rakhimov! There was just that something missing in him—he would always be chief-of-staff, never commander.

"Telephonist," I said, "call up the battery...."

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander.... Here you are, Comrade Battalion Commander. The battery commander is on the line."

I took up the receiver.

"Are you keeping a watch on the enemy?" I asked. "Are the Germans in the village?"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander. I let them pass, as you ordered."

"What are they doing?"

"They're getting a bridge ready by the light of bonfires near the river. Others are in the houses or near the trucks in the streets."

"Are your guns laid?"

"They are."

"Let them have it point-blank, in volleys, forty shells; make them yell!"

"Very good, Comrade Battalion Commander, forty shells in volleys!"

A minute later we heard the muffled reverberation of an artillery volley through the thick walls of our dug-out. I wanted them to know we were there. The roar of guns suddenly rising over the silent fields rumbled far and wide through the darkness and announced: We're here!

Attack us! Turn your artillery and infantry against us! Strike from the air! We're here!

Deprived of communications, gripped in pincers, we had not withdrawn, in spite of the lure of the last free road, the narrow passage that would no longer be there tomorrow.

But then we had stayed here not in order to hide, not in order to be invisible, but to draw the enemy's attention to ourselves, to draw on ourselves the blows that were intended for those who were barring the way to Moscow on a new sector.

Our guns were pounding a visible target, point-blank, at a distance of seven hundred yards. Every volley announced: we have not gone, we're here!

At some point, unknown to us, Regimental Headquarters would hear us. Somewhere Ivan Vasilyevich Panfilov would look up, raise his eyebrows and exclaim happily: "Oho!"

I called the battery commander again.

"How are the Fritzes? Have they started howling? Let them have another volley! High explosive!"

Then I left the dug-out.

I could hear the blast of the guns near by. A white gleam had risen in the sky. That's the stuff to give 'em, that's the stuff!

Once again it became dark in the woods, once again silence fell.... And suddenly, like a belated echo, the muffled roar of other guns came to my ears. I craned my neck and listened eagerly. Once again the guns boomed. They were rumbling a dozen miles or so away, on the right, and apparently (it was hard to determine this exactly), apparently on the line of the battalion, on the Rusa sector. From behind, from the rear, an extremely distant but protracted and powerful sound reached my ears. It was as if someone over there had touched invisible bass strings stretched across the sky. "Katyusha!" Hundreds of shells released simultaneously and making such a clamour in flight were pounding the Germans' night quarters somewhere far, far away.

The roar rumbled away.... Once again it became dark and quiet in the woods....

IN THE FORESTER'S HUT

1

A big, unheated, log-walled room divided the forester's house into two parts. I had all the wounded carried into one half and to the other, were the telephones had already been brought, I called all officers and political officers.

"Listen to my orders," I said. "First: The battalion is surrounded. We will fight in encirclement until we receive orders to withdraw. A sector of the circular defences has been assigned to each company commander. You will work at night so that by dawn every man will have dug himself a full depth fire-trench.

"Second: No one is to surrender and no prisoners are to be taken. I give all commanders the right to shoot cowards on the spot.

"Third: Be sparing with ammunition. I forbid long-distance rifle and machine-gun fire. Fire only to hit. Rifles and cartridges are to be taken away from the wounded and the dead. Fire until the last bullet but one. Keep the last bullet for yourself.

"Fourth: The artillery is to fire only point-blank, directly at a living target. Fire until the last shell but one. The last shell is to be used to blow up the gun.

"Fifth: I order you to pass on all these instructions to your men."

2

There were no questions. Everybody left except Boszhanov, Political Officer of the machine-gun company whom I asked to stay.

"Where are your heroes, Boszhanov?"

"They're here, Comrade Battalion Commander, around Headquarters."

"How many are there?"

"Eight."

These were the few runners and Blokha's machine-gun crew that had allowed the attacking enemy to come close to them in the recent fighting and had then wiped them out at close range.

"I want you to take this party and set out for the German lines," I said.

Placing the map on the table I showed Boszhanov the mark Captain Shilov had made to indicate where the guns and shells had been left in the near-by woods. I told him that we had to try and move all these out from under the very nose of the enemy.

"Take horses. Act cautiously and silently. . . ."

"*Aksakal...*" said Boszhanov with a smile.

"What?"

"*Aksakal*, I want to ask you to make these men my permanent section."

As you already know, our machine-guns had been attached to the rifle companies, and actually the battalion no longer had a separate machine-gun company. Boszhanov, you remember, had been Political Officer of the latter.

"What sort of unit would that be?"

Boszhanov replied quickly:

"The Battalion Commander's reserve.... Your unit, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Well, Commander of the Reserve," I said, "let's go to your 'forces.'"

3

The pale light of the moon filtered into the woods.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Murin, is that you?" Boszhanov asked in reply.

"It's me, Comrade Political Officer."

Boszhanov's "forces" had all crowded under a pine-tree. They were sleeping huddled together on the thick carpet of pine needles, their ground-sheets over their heads.

Murin was on guard duty. Near the piled rifles stood a machine-gun.

"Get the men up, Murin," said Boszhanov.

Waking up the burly Galliulin was a job. He raised his head, sat up and then stretched out again on the soft pine needles. Murin had to poke him.

"Get your rifle! Fall in!" commanded Boszhanov in a low voice.

After looking over the scanty ranks, he walked up to me and reported that the men had fallen in.

"Give them my orders," I said.

"Look here, Comrades," began Boszhanov as he walked over to the men. "The battalion is surrounded."

Then, in the same low voice, he repeated my orders to the men point by point: to organize circular defence, to be sparing of ammunition, to fire only to hit, to fire until only one bullet is left, and to keep the last one for themselves—no surrender.

"The last one for yourself," he repeated slowly, as if he were weighing every word. "If you want to live, fight to the death."

Boszhanov had the knack of uttering such aphorisms. He would say something quite casually and the words would have in them philosophy and wisdom.... In the course of the war I noticed this in others besides him. A real soldier, in whom all that is best comes to the fore during a battle, often utters wise thoughts. But he must be a real soldier.

Boszhanov went on:

"We have guns and machine-guns, and there is real comradeship among us.... Just let the Germans try and get us...."

"Tell the men their mission, Comrade Political Officer," I said.

Unhurriedly, Boszhanov explained that they would have to bring back the guns that had been abandoned in the woods behind the German lines.

"You may dismiss the men," I said when he had finished. "Get ready. Check up on your rifles. Get your things together. But first, come over here to me, friends."

In an instant the men were around me. Murin alone remained on duty at the machine-gun. He also wanted to hear me and turned his head towards us, craning his neck. His eye-glasses glittered in the moonlight.

"Friends!" This was the first time I had addressed my soldiers in this way. I had never liked calling them "boys," or "lads," especially "lads." We weren't playing at soldiers. "Friends" was another thing altogether.

"Today, Comrades, you fought well, you showed that you know your job."

They were not on parade and no answer was expected of them, of course. No one said anything.

"Now I want you to show me how smart you really are: drag out those guns and shells without any noise. We'll be rich then."

"Comrade Battalion Commander," said Muratov, "we should take some sausage along with us."

If he was trying to be funny no one laughed. Sensing the general disapproval, he hastened to add:

"I didn't mean that as a joke, Comrade Battalion Commander. The Germans may have tanks over there"

"You're imagining things, Muratov," said Boszhanov curtly.

"No, Comrade Battalion Commander, I'm being serious. People say they sleep in the tanks at night and chain dogs to them."

"Stop talking nonsense," said Blokha severely.

But it was not nonsense. The dogs actually had to be taken into account; but the moment demanded other words and other talk. The words were not found. Everyone was silent.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, allow me," said Murin.

I was all attention, but Murin simply asked:

"Whom should I hand over the machine-gun to?"

I remembered the first time he had come over to me, three months earlier: in an untidy jacket with his tie askew, bespectacled, lanky, clumsy, not knowing how to stand in front of an officer or what to do with his pale, thin hands. He had come with a complaint. "I've been assigned to non-combatant duty, Comrade Battalion

Commander, they gave me a horse and cart. And I haven't the faintest idea about horses. Besides, I didn't come here to do that sort of thing." I remembered the time he had given way to panic and had fled disgracefully with the rest when a machine-gun had unexpectedly begun to fire close by and someone had shouted: "Germans!" His rifle had trembled when he had stood in the ranks aiming at a traitor and coward whom I had ordered to be shot in front of the ranks.

Murin probably experienced the fear aroused by war more than any other man, he knew the meaning of internal struggle, he knew the torment of spiritual rebirth with recurring pangs of deadly nostalgia and he also knew the savage joy of the warrior who has killed the man who put fear into him, who had come to kill him.

And now, after hearing my orders and learning that he had to go right into the midst of the enemy, he was simply asking:

"Whom should I hand over the machine-gun to?"

What had happened to him? Had he no feelings? Did all this mean nothing to him?

"You'll scarcely be of any use there, Comrade Murin. You can't manage horses. You stay here with the machine-gun."

Naturally I expected to hear the usual regulation answer: "Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander!" but he made no such answer. After a pause he blurted out:

"Comrade Battalion Commander, permit me to ask you ... at such a moment ..." he stopped, drew a deep breath, and went on in a louder voice: "At such a moment, Comrade Battalion Commander, I want to be with my comrades. I ask you to let me go where they go. ..."

So it did mean something to him. He was thinking about it. It was not only duty and discipline which motivated him now, but a loftier feeling, something more humane. It is difficult to explain it but I could feel the spirit of the soldier of the battalion, and I was convinced that we would fight fiercely, that we would wipe out the enemy as long as our bullets lasted.

"Very well, Murin," I said. "Galliulin, take the machine-gun and the belts and bring them to Headquarters. Blokha, fall in the men. And now, Comrades, go to it!"

4

The hours of the night dragged on, and with them night-time thoughts.

All around the edge of the woods the men were hacking away at the roots and digging into the frozen ground. Trees fell as they were sawn down to clear passages for the guns.

We made no effort to keep our presence secret. Let the enemy know that we were here! Never should they have the road that led through Novlyanskoye: that road was covered by our guns. Nor would their lorries or guns be able to pass near our island of forest.

But what difference did that make? The enemy columns were moving over other roads, passing through other points, through Sipunovo, through Krasnaya Gora. Still, guns had answered ours from there, from beyond Krasnaya Gora. Somewhere our forces were holding on: they had dug in somewhere, just as we had, and had barred the road to the Germans at various points.

The front, however, was not continuous, the barrier had been broken, and the Germans were moving past us to Volokolamsk, to Moscow! Would we succeed in halting the enemy at Volokolamsk?

Once again I felt an irresistible urge to go there, to Panfilov, and to our main forces.

Where was Brudny now? Would he get back before dawn? Would he bring the order? Would we get out of encirclement while it was still dark?

No, Baurjan, don't wait.... Regimental H.Q. might no longer exist, Divisional H.Q. was probably surrounded, and tomorrow, or the next day, the line of battle would be twenty or thirty miles behind us. And the order would not reach us, there would be no order.

What then? I was a commander and as such was obliged to take a sober view of the worst that could happen. There would be no order. What then?

The enemy would close in, demand that we surrender, and we would reply with bullets. I had faith in my men. And I knew they had faith in me, their commander. My word, my orders, had been made known to them.

At this very moment they were digging away, bending over mother earth, the soldier's shield and guard. In our deep foxholes no shells or bombs would get us. In order to wipe us out with artillery fire the enemy would have to concentrate against us all the artillery that they were moving to Moscow. As for bombardment, we would hold out against that. We would hold out against hunger too. We had horses and the horse meat would do us for a long time. Just try and crush us!

I had six hundred and fifty men. Every one of them would kill a few Germans before being killed himself. It would take a division to wipe out our battalion. And half the division would be wiped out! Let the Germans pay that price for a battalion of the Panfilov Division.

Deep in thought I sat at the command post in that part of the forester's strong, log-built house that had been allotted to H.Q.

Telephone communication had already been established with the companies and the gun position. From here I could direct our resistance, could send out forces to encounter the enemy. If they managed to break through and drive a wedge into the woods, we would fight in the woods, picking off the enemy from behind the trees and stumps.

The last line, the last defence zone would be here, in the forester's cabin.

The sentries and the telephonists did not sleep after being relieved. They dug pits and trenches around the command post, built reserve machine-gun nests and felled trees to be used as obstacles. We would barricade the windows with logs, bore loop-holes and fight here too, in this house. Two cases of grenades had been brought here and a machine-gun was standing in the corridor.

I had faith in my officers and my men. The Germans would never take anyone alive.

An alarming thought flashed through my mind: but what about the wounded?

5

The wounded! What should I do about them? I crossed to the other end of the cabin where the wounded men were lying.

The paraffin lamp was turned low. Kireyev, our doctor, a blue-eyed elderly man, was putting wood into the stove. The door of the stove was open and the shadows thrown by the flames were flickering on the log walls, on the grey blankets, and on the faces of the men.

Someone was raving. Someone said softly:

"Comrade Battalion Commander!"

I walked over on tiptoe. It was Sevryukov who had called me. He was lying flat on his back on the edge of a hastily-built bunk. He did not raise his head, which was sunk into the pillow. He wheezed slightly as he breathed. Splinters had pierced his chest, and his wounds were serious but not fatal. I had a queer feeling that I had known he was wounded a terribly long time ago, whereas actually it had happened only a few hours before.

I sat down at his feet. He tried to raise himself on his elbows, but dropped back immediately with a stifled groan. Kireyev came running up. Gently settling Sevryukov on his pillow, he scolded him in a grumbling yet affectionate tone, as if he were a naughty child.

"Go away, Kireyev," snapped Sevryukov. He kept quiet until Kireyev had walked back to the stove. Then he said to me in a whisper:

"Bend down a little. I want to ask you what's going on out there?" He glanced at the wall. "What's up, Comrade Battalion Commander?"

"What do you mean, 'what's up'?"

"Why aren't you sending us to the rear?"

What was I to say? Should I deceive him? No. Let him know.

"The battalion is surrounded."

He closed his eyes. Against the white pillow his grey face, with the short stubble and the hair neatly clipped at the temples, seemed lifeless. He was thinking about something. He raised his dark eyelids.

"Comrade Battalion Commander.... Give me a gun...."

"Yes, that has to be done, Sevryukov. I'll see to it...."

I wanted to get up, but Sevryukov took my hand.

"You.... You won't leave us behind?"

His eyes as well as his hand fastened on to me.

"No, Sevryukov, I won't leave you behind."

His fingers relaxed. Wanly he smiled at me. He trusted his battalion commander.

With a heavy heart I walked over to the door. But once again I heard:

"Comrade Battalion Commander...."

I walked over to the voice, although I was reluctant to.

"Is that you, Sudarushkin?"

Under the spotless white bandage his head looked abnormally big. The bandage covered his forehead, but not his face. A bandaged and also strangely enormous hand lay motionless on the blanket, as if it did not belong to him.

"When did this happen to you?"

"Don't you remember, Comrade Battalion Commander? You yourself told me to shut up."

So it had been he.... I remembered the face with the blood streaming down it, the wet red hands and the monotonous, horrible cries. I had ordered him to be quiet, and he had meekly stopped groaning.

"Did we drive them off?" Sudarushkin asked.

Why trouble his soul ahead of time?

"Yes," I answered.

"Thanks be.... Will I get sick-leave home, Comrade Battalion Commander?"

"Of course," I said.

He smiled.

"And then I'll come back, Comrade Battalion Commander. I'll take my place in your ranks again...."

"Of course you will."

I walked away quickly so as not to have to hear any more questions and not to have to tell lies in answer. Turning round I caught sight of Captain Shilov. He was lying with his back against the wall, the blanket covering him only to the waist. His eyes were fixed on me. The night lamp threw a feeble light, and heavy shadows played over his gaunt face. Most likely he could not fall asleep and did not even try to do so. Brought here with a smashed leg, he alone of all the wounded men knew what none of the others knew as yet. He knew and said nothing. He kept quiet even now, asking no questions and not even opening his lips.

What was I to do with these helpless, defenceless men? Tell me, what was I to do with them?

Could I do this?... When the end was near, when only one machine-gun belt remained, I would come in here with a machine-gun, bow low, and say:

"All the men fought to the last bullet but one. All of them are dead. Forgive me, Comrades. I have no way of evacuating you, and I have no right to abandon you to the mercy of the Germans to be tortured. Let us die like Soviet soldiers.

"... I shall be the last to die. First I will smash the machine-gun and then I will kill myself."

Could I do this? But what other way was there? Could I hand over the wounded men to the enemy to be tortured? Tell me, what else could I do?

... And not a soul would remain alive to tell how this battalion of the Panfilov Division, the 1st Battalion of the Talgar Regiment, had perished. Some time after the war, perhaps, a report would be found in the German military archives that would give the figures of German soldiers destroyed by a surrounded Soviet battalion. Then, perhaps, people would know how we fought and how we died in these nameless woods in the Moscow Region ... or perhaps it would never be known.

The hours of the night and the thoughts of the night dragged on.

6

Brudny had not come back. Boszhanov had not come back.

I rode out to the fringe of the woods where the men were digging trenches some waist deep in the ground, others up to their shoulders and even deeper. Some of the men were altogether out of sight and only their shovels could be seen flashing over the black pits as they threw out the earth.

At times the moon shone brightly, then it would cloud over. The frost had slackened and the sky was overcast.

I peered into the darkness in the direction from which Brudny might appear. I felt like firing another volley at Novlyanskoye, at Novoshchurino. We are not sleeping and we don't intend to let you sleep! But we had to be sparing with our shells; we needed them to hold the road, needed them for point-blank fire on the attacking enemy when the time came.

The night seemed interminably long. I turned Lysanka back to headquarters. The good mare picked her way among the trees slowly. I did not hurry her. What for?

I lay wakeful in the house, thinking.

Around one o'clock in the morning the telephone rang.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, you're wanted," said the operator.

It was Muratov calling. Boszhanov had sent ahead his runner to let me know that his party was on its way with the shells and guns.

Lysanka was still saddled. I galloped out to meet them. Four hundred shells! Now we could pound Novlyanskoye and Novoshchurino. The Nazis had crowded into the cottages there for the night. Now you'll raise your voices, come tumbling out of the warmth, Herr Conquerors! We are not sleeping and we are not going to let you sleep either!

EIGHTY-SEVEN

1

Accompanied by Sinchenko, I rode out to meet the party near the woods.

We stopped to let the guns go by. The heavy artillery wheels sank through the snow to the black ground. Boszhanov reported with gusto that the Germans were not taking any precautions, no sentries had been posted and the tiny force had not met with any opposition.

Lysanka recognized Jalmukhamed and stretched her muzzle towards him. He often petted her and treated her to titbits. Now, too, a piece of sugar crunched between her teeth.

Boszhanov's tiny force...? What the devil, tiny! What was this? Where had he collected these men from?

Beside the horses, beside the guns and the boxes of shells, figures in great-coats carrying rifles were marching along.

"Who've you brought? Who are these men?" I asked.

"Almost a hundred men, Comrade Battalion Commander," Boszhanov answered gleefully. "From Shilov's battalion. They came out of the woods in two's and three's. All but kissed us!"

"Column, halt!" I commanded.

The horses stopped and the squeaking of wheels died down.

"All men from other units, fall out! You are not to follow the guns! Section Commander Blokha!"

"Here!"

"See that my orders are carried out! Sinchenko!"

"Here!"

"Convey my orders to the nearest company commander and then to Rakhimov at headquarters: not a single man of any other unit is to be allowed into the battalion's position!"

"Very well, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Carry on!"

He galloped off.

Dark figures detached themselves from the long column. Some of them stood at a distance, where they had fallen out, others were coming up to me. Blokha reported that only our own men were now in the column.

"Column, march!"

The guns moved. I watched in silence. The last in line was Murin, rifle in hand.

I flicked the reins and Lysanka set out after him.

"And what about us? Where do we go, Comrade Commander?"

"Wherever you want to. I don't need deserters."

2

They followed me in a crowd.

"Comrade Commander, take us in. . . ."

"Comrade Commander, they came at us from the rear, from all sides. That's how it happened, Comrade Commander."

"We've come out of encirclement, Comrade Commander!"

"Are you sending us to be prisoners or something? You have no right. . . ."

I did not answer, I was too despondent. "Out of encirclement." Again that word. It grated on my ears, it had become abhorrent.

I felt like shouting, "And where are your officers? Why didn't they keep you in hand?" But I remembered the wounded Captain Shilov. I remembered with what passion he had said, "But, two companies did fight. After all, they did not abandon their wounded commander."

Nevertheless the battalion had been smashed and had scattered through the woods. "Was this inevitable?" That was the question Shilov had asked himself out loud recently in my dug-out. He had asked—but had not answered.

These soldiers had been spared before the battle. They had fled from the enemy. Fear had entered their hearts. They might run here, too. No; I could not let them into our island. I had no right to do so.

"*Aksakal*, you're not doing right," said Boszhanov in Kazakh.

So! A champion had appeared. And he, it seemed, was following me too, together with the deserters he had rounded up.

"You're not doing right," he repeated. "These are Soviet people, Red Army men. You can't do that, *aksakal.*"

I did not cut him short but neither did I answer. Boszhanov went on:

"Appoint me their commander. I brought them, and I'll go into action with them. Set us a task; give us some sector."

"No," I said.

3

Although they did not understand the Kazakh language, the men crowded round Lysanka, listening eagerly to what we were saying. Most likely they guessed by the intonation that the stout political officer was putting in a word for them, while the skinny dry stick on the horse, who kept quiet all the time and had then barked out some word or other, would have none of it. Some of them tried to get a look at my face.

Lysanka kept turning towards our woods all the time, just as if she too were asking to go there.

I had given Boszhanov's words due consideration. And I had answered:

"No!" And I turned Lysanka away from the woods.

The men were begging to go with me, hanging on to me, but I could not—understand me—could not take them into the battalion. If I had had a chance to work with them, to train them and to steel them, I am sure they would have become first-class fighting men. But for that, time was needed, and I had no time. Only a few hours more and heavy fighting would begin.

What could I do for them? They had better go. I would help them make their way to where they would be taken in hand, whipped into shape and turned into real soldiers. But here.... Here they were not needed.

I turned away from the forest and, without looking back, rode across the field at a walk. I was challenged by our sentries several times.

Sinchenko came back.

"Your orders have been carried out, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Did you call up Rakhimov?"

"Yes."

I waited a while in the hope that Sinchenko would say something else, give me some news from Rakhimov. But he was silent.

"All right," I snapped.

We were near the road that led to Dolgorukovka, the road that led to our main forces. There, up and down a narrow passage, our mounted scouts were patrolling. They had been given the task of keeping a constant watch on whether the road was clear, whether the loophole left us had not been closed.

In my heart of hearts I still hoped that orders would come, that we would be able to slip out of the noose before daylight, while there was still a way out.

I looked for one of the mounted patrols.

"Any news?" I asked.

"Nothing to report. No change, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Who knows the road?"

"I do, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"The detour around Dolgorukovka?"

"Yes."

"You are to act as an escort and guide these stragglers through."

Turning to the men who were standing around, listening to what I was saying, I pointed to the road and said:

"Over there is Volokolamsk and our forces. You'll be taken there. Go ahead."

Then I turned Lysanka back to the woods.

4

Suddenly I heard the pounding of feet behind me.

"Comrade Commander.... Comrade Commander."

"What do you want?"

"Comrade Commander.... Take us in with you, Comrade Commander!"

"Stop this arguing!" I said sharply. "Here are my orders! Not a single man of any other unit will be allowed within the battalion lines!"

"What do you mean, 'other units!' We belong to the same army, don't we? Comrade Commander, as a matter of fact you even know me personally. My name is Polzunov. You were there when the General spoke to me. Remember?"

Polzunov.... In the dark I could not see him, but I remembered his young face, the full lips slightly parted, and his serious grey eyes, remembered his stubborn answer: "Fine, Comrade General!" There was "fine" for you!

"What happened to you, Polzunov? The General said: 'I want to hear of you, Polzunov.' And you?"

He did not answer.

"And you?" I repeated. "You ran, eh?"

"We would have died out there for nothing.... I'm not keen on dying for nothing, Comrade Commander."

Someone beside him chimed in boldly:

"And what were we to do when they jumped at us from behind? Sit in our holes and wait for them to pick us off? Well, and so we beat it! I'll tell you plain, I ran too.... And what was my idea? You've got me right now, but you just wait—I'll get you later. We'll square accounts.... I'm not going where you're sending us, Comrade Commander. Even if I have to stay here by myself, I'll go partisaning on my own! I tell you plain: do with me what you like, but I'm not going!"

"Your name?" I asked.

"Private Pashko."

Polzunov hastily backed him up:

"That's the truth he's saying, Comrade Commander. He's Pashko. Maybe you're afraid there's spies here. Nothing of the sort, Comrade Commander. I know everybody here.... Besides, you can check up by their papers. You blokes have all got your service books, haven't you?"

"Have all of you got rifles?" I asked.

"All of us.... All of us...."

"Every man will answer for himself. Have you grenades?"

"Yes! I have!"

There were fewer voices this time.

"Lost them in the panic, did you? Polzunov will take command. Fall in! Get them into shape. Those with grenades on the right flank."

Without waiting for any other command, the men hurriedly began to fall in.

"Comrade Commander!" exclaimed Polzunov. "There are men my senior in rank here."

"We'll see about rank later. At this moment all of you have the same rank: deserter!"

Again Pashko's voice rang out:

"I don't take that as applying to me!"

"Silence!"

Pashko seemed more daring than the others, but the cardinal virtue of a soldier is to obey his commander without question, and that was not one of his characteristics. Yes, even with a head of gold like Shilov's you're in a pretty poor way if the soldiers aren't properly trained, as Panfilov said. No, I really ought not to take them in. . . . With a heavy heart, I gave the order:

"Right dress! Polzunov, dress the ranks! Atten-tion! No talking! No fidgeting! Number!"

Polzunov reported that, counting himself, there were eighty-seven men.

"Not men!" I said. "Eighty-seven runaways, eighty-seven rabbits! I'm not going to do much talking to you. You started wailing: take us in. Moscow does not believe your tears. Neither do I. My orders remain the same: Not a single one of the cowards who ran away from his sector will enter the lines of my battalion. Only real fighting men can join our ranks. Go back to the place you ran away from. Go even farther, behind the enemy lines. Go there now, this instant. And come back when you've shown your worth. Then you may be allowed into the battalion. I appoint Political Officer Boszhanov commander of the detachment. Right, turn! Follow me, quick . . . 'arch!"

5

Taking up the reins I sent Lysanka ahead at a slow even pace. Behind me, in two's, followed the eighty-seven. Boszhanov marched beside me.

He asked for instructions.

"Wait a while. . . ." I snapped.

I was very depressed. Where was I leading them? I was riding on aimlessly, without reconnoitring, without a plan, without knowing myself where I was going. The men were disorganized, there were no sections or platoons, nobody knew his place, and they would certainly not be able to get into battle order. Even though they were in some sort of order, they were still a mob.

I knew that I ought to arrange for a vanguard, that I should send for one or two of my own platoons so that we could attack the Germans from two or three directions.

Ought to.... Ah, how much more ought to have been done....

There were moments when I was tortured by a sense of duty. I knew that the battalion needed me. My place was not here! What was urging me to go with the devil knew whom? the devil knew where? I had no right to leave my battalion, to rush into some ill-considered, reckless enterprise that would end in disaster.

But I had not the strength or the will-power to do otherwise.

It occurred to me that Brudny might suddenly return in my absence, bringing the order. I laughed uneasily: don't try to console yourself, no order will come.

Ahead of us lay a stretch of snow black from dust. Lysanka picked her way round the craters. We passed the line of silent and deserted trenches.

Everything here was familiar, I knew every path, every communication trench—and at the same time it was strange and wild. Away to one side, in Novlyanskoye, I could see two or three lighted windows. The Germans were not afraid of us and disdained such things as black-out. I was furious—just you wait!

I glanced back at the long straggling line. Eighty-seven runaways. What could they do? Oh, not like this, this is not what we ought to be doing at all....

I recalled how just one week back I had sent a hundred of my own men on a night raid. We had shivered then, trembled with the fever of excitement, of adventure, sensing in advance that we would achieve a victory. That was a real operation—an idea, sober, calculated, a blow to kill.

But now, why was I going? What the devil was carrying me on to certain failure?

6

Passing the line of empty trenches, we went down to the river. Here every crossing, every plank thrown from bank to bank was familiar to us.

I stopped the men by one of these small bridges. Gurgling and frothing, the river flowed over the logs that had been thrown across in pairs.

On the opposite bank, about a hundred paces from the water, the black forest began.

In a low voice I explained our mission: to get to Novlyanskoye from the opposite bank, through the woods, crossing the river again when they were opposite the village; to get into the village, wipe out the Germans, and set fire to the trucks and the pontoon bridge.

"Is that clear?" I asked.

Only a few low voices answered:

"Yes. . . ."

There was no feeling of general excitement, none of the elation that comes before a battle. These men who had just run away from the Germans did not believe that they would now be capable of terrifying the enemy. And I? Did I believe it?

"You will cross here one by one. Then you will advance in single file," I ordered. "Polzunov, lead the way!"

Polzunov ran forward, crouching low, his rifle at the trail. By the bridge he stopped, then stepped on to the slippery plank. After that he was invisible against the dark background of the river. Soon his silhouette appeared against the white embankment of the opposite shore.

He crawled up the slope, peered for a moment over the crest, then jumped up and strode off towards the woods.

"Leading file, advance!" I said. "In the woods you're to advance in single file, in the order in which you numbered off. Keep an interval of five to eight paces."

Responding to my touch, Lysanka stepped into the river. It was shallow here, only up to her belly.

Why had I ordered the men to move through the woods singly? Why at such long intervals? Let me tell you what was in the back of my mind. I thought that the cowards would sneak away. In the dark woods this would be easy. A man could easily slip off, hide behind a tree and be out of sight. And, the devil take him—be lost! Free to go where he liked, without a country and without honour! I assumed that half the men, or even less, would remain. These I could trust, and I would turn them back and take them into the battalion.

Overtaking Polzunov, I cantered along among the trees, leading the way, keeping near the outskirts of the woods. I took care not to look back.

It had grown warmer and the branches were dripping. Clouds veiled the moon, which shone through them dimly.

At last I reached the farther edge of the woods, where the road to Novlyanskoye passed.

The pontoon bridge was near by, then came a low hill, and the village. A few windows were brightly lit up.

One by one the men came up. Last came Boszhanov. I gave the order to fall in.

"Polzunov! Check your men!"

After walking from end to end, he reported in a whisper....

7

"Eighty-seven, Comrade Commander."

Eighty-seven! They were all here! They had all come to fight!

I felt a flicker of joy. They were already dear to me; my heart took them in. Perhaps my excitement had another cause, perhaps a nervous current emanated from them.

Suddenly I heard the sound of an approaching car. I turned my head in the direction of the sound and the same instant two beams of white light flooded us through the trees. The headlights of the car, which was ascending a slight incline, were blazing. A bend in the road had thrown the light our way.

No one stirred. The men stood there with pale faces, clutching their glistening rifles and peering ahead intently. The black shadows of trees moved past slowly.

The beams slid on, bouncing up and down; then they receded, grew shorter, and fell on the road.

I jumped down from my saddle. After the dazzling light I could not distinguish anyone and could only dimly make out Lysanka's white socks.

"Lie down! Keep watch!" I commanded.

Gradually my eyes became accustomed to the darkness again. The headlights were reflected in the water. I could hear the clattering of the bridge floor. Directly in front of the car the red spot of a pocket flash-light gleamed. The car crossed the bridge and stopped. A sentry walked over, into the glare of the headlights. Some of his gestures were easy to understand. Turning around he pointed twice towards the woods where our battalion was entrenched. Then he gestured in the direction of Krasnaya Gora. Evidently, a detour had to be made there.

The motor started up again and the car proceeded up the hill. For a moment the headlights picked out the street with the long lorries standing in front of the houses. Then the beams of light crept past and continued along the bank, going a roundabout way.

Someone came up to me.

"Comrade Commander, I'll go."

The voice was familiar.

"Pashko?"

"Yes. I'll go."

"Where?"

"I'll deal with him...."

"The sentry? How?"

He opened his coat and I could see the gleam of a knife-blade.

"Don't worry," he said. "Afterwards I'll whistle."

"You mustn't do that." I handed him my flashlight. "Take this, and flash it three times."

He put the flash-light under his cap.

"I can signal with the captured one too, the red one. May I?"

"You may. Flash it three times and that will mean the road is clear. Will you manage alone?"

I heard rather than saw the smile he gave.

"I'll manage."

"Go to it!"

Pashko was soon lost from view.

Well, come what may, now I could not turn back. Was that how we'd fight, in a mob? I called over Boszhanov.

"Divide the men into parties of ten. Take one party yourself and attack the outpost opposite the battalion from the rear. Another ten are to set fire to the bridge. Let the others operate in the village. Everyone with grenades is to go there."

"Very well, Comrade Battalion Commander."

He set about carrying out my orders.

Two more cars drove past. Again the sentry appeared in the glare of the headlights. Again the beams of light silvered the street. The door of one of the houses opened and a tall figure appeared in his underwear and barefoot, stretching sleepily. Swine! So that's how they slept at the front, undressing down to their underwear, in houses and in beds.

Again everything was swallowed up by the darkness. The white beams flickered, turned and made off by a roundabout road.

We were lying flat on the ground, hardly breathing, staring in the direction Pashko had gone. Would he succeed? Would there be a signal? And what then? How would it come off, this "then"?

For a moment I was overcome by a strange sensation: it seemed to me that the whole business, exactly as it was at that moment had happened before (I don't know when—in some other life, perhaps), that we had lain just like that in the darkness, hidden, crawling up behind the enemy camp, ready at any moment to leap in there. How strange it all seemed—was this really modern warfare? I had not imagined it would be like that.

But where was that signal? The minutes were tormentingly long. Ah! That must be it....

In the darkness a red spot flashed in someone's unseen hand. Flashed and disappeared.... Once.... Flashed again.... Twice.... Three times!

"Get up!" I ordered. "Stand by! Grenades ready! Well, Comrades, now its a case of sink or swim. Into the village without a sound. Boszhanov, lead the way!"

"Across the bridge?"

"Yes."

In a whisper he gave the command:

"Follow me!"

He dashed off and after him rushed all the others.

A minute later I could hear the clatter over the bridge.

8

Everything went off well. The success of it was so foolishly easy.

Slowly I crossed the bridge into the village, which was now lit by the glare of burning houses.

Grenades were bursting, rifle shots cracking everywhere; and shouts of fury or terror could be heard. This was no battle, it was a massacre.

The Germans had posted sentries facing the woods where our battalion was entrenched and then calmly undressed and settled down for the night in beds or in the haylofts. On hearing shots and grenades they had come running out, scurrying around like rats and trying to hide anywhere: under beds, in ovens, in cellars and barns, shivering with cold and fear.

I will not describe those scenes.

The bridge, which we had soaked with petrol, was in flames. The black hulk of the church loomed against the sky. As I had done so many times before during that day, I returned to its stone steps. The window-panes had been blown out, most of the window-frames were empty and black but the few remaining pieces of glass reflected the flames.

I sent off Sinchenko to find Boszhanov and told him to fall in the men and bring them to the battalion's position.

9

Once again Lysanka picked her way among the trees to the forester's cabin. Once again my heart was heavy within me. I slumped in my saddle, feeling none of that elation that comes with success, feeling none of the joy of victory.

Victory is forged before the battle, Panfilov had taught us. I had learned this, and much more besides, from him.

But what had I done in this case before the battle? I had met the runaways and led them at random. And that was all. You know my convictions, my officer's credo. "Easy victories do not gladden the heart of a Russian," said Suvorov.

Gloomy thoughts crept into my mind. What if we had wiped out a hundred and fifty or two hundred Germans? What next? The battalion was still in a ring, still an island surrounded by a strong enemy.

All the way back to headquarters I kept wondering whether Brudny had returned with orders. I realized that this constant looking forward to orders to retreat was cowardly and undignified. But such was the truth. I hid it from everyone, but there was no hiding it from my own conscience.

10

A lamp was burning in the big room at headquarters. Rakhimov, whose face looked weary, got to his feet as I came in. Tolstunov, who was lying huddled up under a great-coat on the floor, raised his head. They both looked at me in expectation. . . .

Was there any use in asking? All the same I did ask, although I knew the answer. No, Brudny had not come and there were no orders.

Supper was brought in. I did not feel like eating. Tolstunov got up. Soon Boszhanov came in. He had a present for me, a pair of powerful German field-glasses. How pleased I would have been at any other time. . . . At that moment I was completely indifferent.

It was getting on for morning, past three o'clock. I felt I ought to have some rest before dawn, but I was sure I would not be able to get to sleep.

I called for Sinchenko.

"Sinchenko, is there any vodka? Have a drink, Rakhimov."

He refused. I poured some for Tolstunov and myself. Perhaps if I had a drink I would fall asleep.

MORNING

1

I lay down, putting my padded jacket, which smelt of wood smoke, under my head. Lighting a cigarette, I glanced at my watch. I caught sight of my fur cap on a bench. It was rather far from me and not in its proper place. I should take it and tie it to my belt by the ear-flaps so that in case of an alarm I would not have to look for it. But I did not want to think of alarms or of what lay ahead. Nevertheless I got up. I took those few steps for my cap, bringing me back to reality—I compelled myself to take them. I wanted to forget everything, to forget this cabin and these woods.

I lay down again and closed my eyes. Scenes of the beloved past rose behind my closed eyelids. I cannot recapture them now. All sorts of things flashed through my mind.

One thing I remember clearly: I thought not only of myself but of the battalion as well. Though as a matter of fact, that too was about myself.

During those moments of depression, during my trance, my incoherent visions had nothing to do, of course, with the article in the regulations that requires a commander to speak of his unit in the first person. To me this was not just an article in the regulations, but a matter of honour, conscience, creative urge and passion. How else can I put it? My whole ego was immersed in my battalion. It was my creation, the only thing in the world that I had created.

I remembered many things. Big and small, sad and funny.

For example? Very well, here's an example.

2

One sunny August day my battalion went out to the rifle range.

Our camp was pitched near the Talgarka, a swift mountain stream. Not far off, near the village of Talgar, we could see green orchards, where the finest apples in the world, the big Alma-Ata apples, come from. All round was the flat steppe land, scorched by the sun. But to the south the Tien-Shan mountains rose over the steppe. There on the horizon, hardly distinguishable from the glare of the sky, gleamed the eternally snow-covered peaks. The beauty of Southern Kazakhstan defies description.

The steppe was an ideal place for musketry practice. It was not only close at hand, but literally underfoot, and as smooth as an ironing-board.

It was easy and even pleasant to march a mile or two over such level ground, do a bit of shooting and then return to camp. But I was getting the men ready for war. Easy? Pleasant? Then it wouldn't do! Away with the ideal rifle range.

I led the battalion to the mountains. Clambering up to the first ledge we saw that the whole place was covered with a thorny creeper called "kurai." No, it would be impossible to do any shooting here.

There was a steep rocky ascent to the next stretch of level ground. Battalion, forward! Follow me! We began climbing up the mountain. It was steep, stones rolled down under the soldiers' boots with a swish and a rattle.

Upon reaching the next ledge we found that this, too, was no place for target practice. The lush grass grew here in a wall almost the height of a man. Where could we go then? Still higher up the slope we could see the dark green of oak woods.

Such are the contrasts in the mountains. But I must say, incidentally, that the same is true of the whole of Kazakhstan. Have you ever heard the legend of how Kazakhstan was created? In the days of creation, God made heaven and earth, the seas and the oceans, all countries and all continents. But he forgot about Kazakhstan. He remembered it only at the last moment, when he no longer had any material left. Quickly he snatched up bits from various places—a morsel of America, a crumb of Italy, a slice of African desert and a strip of the Caucasus, shaped it and put it down where Kazakhstan was meant to be. There, in the place I come from, you will find everything—eternally bare expanses of salt deserts that seemed to be damned by the heavens, and the loveliest and most fertile of regions.

But where could we have our rifle practice? I fell in the battalion four deep and led this wall over the wall of grass. We marched back and forth several times. The heavy army boots crushed, broke off and trampled down the grass. The last time the men marched across the field, they pulled out whatever stems were left with their bare hands. I stood a bit to one side and admired the sight. What a power this battalion of mine was! Soon our time would come and my battalion—disciplined, ready for battle, hardened—would cut into the thick of the enemy and trample them down just as it had this grass. I knew that actually war was not like this; still, that was what I pictured to myself.

A wide, long rectangle had been cleared in the grass. At one end plywood targets were set up. The battalion was still standing in formation. Everyone saw the targets with the charcoal drawings of heads in helmets bearing the sign of the swastika. I wanted to test the strength of the battalion once more. I ordered the front rank to lie down and the second to kneel, then I gave the command....

"At the fascists, in volley fire.... Battalion...."

Here I paused. Several hundred rifles were trained on four targets. At that time the regulations made no provision for battalion volley fire, but nevertheless I tried it:

"Fire!"

Devil take it! With one volley we were left without targets. They might have been chopped down. Seven hundred rounds fired at once is a terrible thing. The posts to which the targets had been nailed were hacked off by the bullets, and the plywood was splintered to shreds. I swore and then laughed out loud: after all the trouble we had been to, clambering up the mountain and making our own range, we were still unable to finish our target practice.

In this way we learned, in this way we cut down the enemy before the actual fighting. And *now*.... But I did not want even to think about that "now."

And once again scenes of the old days passed before my closed eyes. No, not all of them concerned the battalion. There were others too. All sorts of things flashed through my mind.

3

And suddenly I heard Brudny's voice.

"Comrade Battalion Commander...."

I had been trying to compel myself not to expect him to return with the order but still I was expecting him. Half-asleep, I laughed and jumped up.

Rakhimov was already on his feet. His coat fell on the floor. But my neat, imperturbable Chief-of-Staff did not even pick it up. He was smiling, staring at Brudny and Kurbatov.

They had come in together. A smooth layer of mud that had not yet dried glistened on their coats. Apparently they had had to crawl part of the way.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, permit me...."

I realized then that this was no dream. It was the same Brudny, the same rapid speech, quick glance and flushed cheeks—still alive!

"Have you brought the orders?"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander, we're ordered to retreat...."

Brudny handed me a note.

Whenever you want something very badly you do not always believe that you have it when it comes. I remember wondering again whether it was a dream or not. No, my visions were already over. I glanced at my watch. Half past three. Had I really only been dozing a few minutes?

Major Yelin, Regimental Commander, in a few hastily scribbled lines informed me that in the woods outside the village of Dolgorukovka we would be met by one of the Staff officers, who would give us further instructions about the route to follow to Volokolamsk, where our regiment was being concentrated.

To Volokolamsk! A withdrawal of twenty miles! But there was no time to grieve, it was half-past three, and at seven it would begin to grow light.

4

The battalion marched through the dusk over the slippery muck of the thawing ground in column of companies—men, guns, two-wheeled carts with machine-guns, waggons carrying ammunition, ambulances and then again men.

Out of habit I let the column pass me, urged Lysanka on again, and then let it pass me once more.

From time to time the hazy spot of the moon showed in the black sky. At such times even the darkness was hazy.

I overtook the battalion again. Krayev was leading the column. His company was the vanguard. Splashing through the puddles, swinging his long arms, his body bent slightly forward as ever, he marched evenly, setting the pace. The men followed, marching in fours. The company passed.

Behind it came the carts of the ambulance platoon, in the midst of combatant units. We were transporting forty wounded men. I caught sight of our doctor, Kireyev, heavy and pot-bellied, worrying over his wounded and tending to them as he walked along beside the carts, bending over one, fixing up another until the darkness swallowed him.

Then came Boszhanov's army, the stragglers.

Having made a detour round Dolgorukovka, we were now approaching the road that has already been mentioned so many times in our story—the metalled road that led to Volokolamsk, running into the Volokolamsk Highway there almost at right angles.

A few days earlier, on October 16, after concentrating their forces, the Germans had made a push on this road, reckoning that they would smash through our defences at one blow and then be able to go on in tanks, lorries and motor cycles along the Volokolamsk Highway to Moscow. Hurled back at the Bulychevo State Farm, stemmed on the following days in other sectors, they still refused to believe that they had failed, knowing how small were the forces opposing them in this area. They felt that with a little more pressure and another spurt the barrier would be broken, and before them the road to Moscow—the asphalt Volokolamsk Highway—would open up. Our units which had been fighting on the road were withdrawing. But on the next day, the very same battalions and regiments rose in the path of the enemy and again engaged him in lengthy and long-drawn-out battles. Every time this happened the Germans thought that it was the last pocket of resistance, the last battle, and they pushed ahead stubbornly, unwilling to relinquish the direction they had chosen. The Volokolamsk Highway remained as before the focal point of their main drive.

5

On the other side of Dolgorukovka we were met by Lieutenant Kurgansky, assistant to the Regimental Chief-of-Staff. Expansive and energetic, he took me joyfully by the hand. He began straight away to tell me that there had been heavy casualties in the second and third battalions. The men had fought in small groups, just a few together, had withdrawn and again dug themselves in on the road to kill Germans, to wear down the enemy's forces. Under cover of units fighting a rearguard action, under cover of artillery that was battering at the tanks, our troops were rapidly withdrawing to Volokolamsk, to the key point that blocked the highway. This was the new line to be held by our Division.

Kurgansky had brought with him several cartloads of provisions for the battalion, including a ton of white bread baked that night in Volokolamsk.

The carts were waiting for us in the woods. I decided to shelter the battalion here, give the men a chance to eat and rest, and feed the horses.

But the heavy draught horses of the artillery had to go back again. In the woods we had come from we had hidden the six guns and four hundred shells we had dragged out of the German lines during the night. I had decided to bring them out again from under the noses of the Germans.

The sky was brightening in the east but a fog lay heavily all round. The battalion was withdrawing into the woods. I rode over to Boszhanov.

"Boszhanov! Halt your men. Fall out ten paces from the road."

I ordered the other units to carry on straight ahead, and looked over my reserve unit, the one not provided for in regulations. Standing around the machine-gun cart were my machine-gunners. Farther in the ranks were the men whom I had chased away from the battalion last night, the men who had subsequently been purged in battle.

I ordered Boszhanov to take the artillery horses and, under cover of the fog, to try and bring the shells and guns here.

"Take your whole unit. Cover the guns on all four sides. If you encounter a small enemy party, try to wipe it out; but don't get into any serious fighting. Better blow up the guns and withdraw. Act quickly. Remember that we are waiting for you."

Clicking his heels, and saluting smartly, Boszhanov replied:

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander."

He looked smarter than ever. His face was eager. Evidently he liked being a commander, liked carrying out dangerous missions independently.

6

The men made fires, boiled water for tea and dried their clothes. Many of them chopped down pine branches and lay down to sleep on them—the soldier's green feather bed. In the field kitchen a good meat stew was being cooked. The battalion was resting after having set up circular defences.

It was thawing. The fog had begun to lift. A cloudy morning dawned.

Around eight o'clock, when according to my calculations Boszhanov had had sufficient time to get back, we heard the drone of rapidly approaching planes. Just under the low clouds, a little way off German bombers were flying. Almost immediately, invisible machine-guns and artillery started their din from the ground. The heavy blasts of air bombs roared. The aircraft flew over in waves, echelon after echelon, dropping their load on some point two or three miles away, where the Volokolamsk Highway ran.

The gun-fire suddenly grew heavier. There were no longer any aircraft in the sky, but in the area where the bombs had just landed heavy guns were now booming—not just ten or twenty, but something more like a hundred or a hundred and fifty. The mounted patrol I had sent out reported that the Germans had launched a tank attack and that our artillery was pounding the panzers.

Soon a barrage began on the other side, also about three or four miles away. The artillery fire there was fainter, but it was supplemented by the sound of rifle and machine-gun fire.

And still Boszhanov did not come. What on earth had made me halt the battalion here? What on earth had prompted me to send off the horses and men for the guns! The guns should have been blown up on the spot, and that would have been the end of the matter.

How could I move now, without the artillery horses? And it wasn't the horses that mattered.... How could I leave before the detachment came back, abandoning my own men?

The sounds of the cannonade came from two directions, but still Boszhanov did not come.... Hell! Was this to be a repetition of the day before? We had to clear out as quickly as possible, in accordance with orders, and there we were, unable to budge....

I turned to Rakhimov and said:

"Pass the order to the company commanders to dispose their men for circular defence."

AT THE CROSS-ROADS

1

After a short lull, the guns on the highway began to boom frantically again. In the sustained roar it was no longer possible to distinguish individual shots.

Nor had the fighting died down on the other side, it seemed to grow louder there, too.

And Boszhanov, devil take it, was still not here! I cursed myself, cursed him, sent out mounted scouts to meet him. But my anger did not make it any easier to move. I had pinned myself down, nailed myself down with my own hands....

The men dug trenches all round the outskirts of the woods. So far we were only doing this just as a precaution. As soon as Boszhanov turned up we would pack up and move on. The men would grumble about having dug for nothing. God grant that it really would be for nothing!

I made the round of the companies with Rakhimov. After the short rest, the white bread and the hot meat stew, the men were in much better spirits. They greeted me with jokes. The near-by artillery fire and the rifle shots coming from various directions made no particular impression on them. It wasn't the first time, and fear belonged to the past, to the history of the battalion. I was more at ease, too. I was sure that we would come through.

2

I sent for the company commanders, explained that Boszhanov's unit had gone for the guns and had been away longer than had originally been agreed on; I informed them of my decision—the battalion would not leave until they returned. If necessary, we would go to their rescue.

By the expression on their faces I saw that they understood and welcomed this order.

After talking a while with the commanders, I dismissed them. We left the tent together.

A mounted man appeared among the trees. From the distance he shouted jubilantly:

"They're coming!"

We all stood still.

The scout brought the long-awaited news: our men were on their way here and were already near the woods, bringing up the guns.

Now at last I could give the command to continue our march to Volokolamsk.

"Get to your places!" I said. "Stand by to move! Filimonov, come here!"

Filimonov, a thirty-five-year-old, lanky, energetic lieutenant, was Commander of No. 3 Company.

I told him to take his company forward as our advanced guard. When a battalion is on the line of march the advanced guard keeps about two or two and a half miles ahead of the main body.

We examined the map together. The direct and most convenient route was along the highway. The recent thaw had most likely turned all the other roads into a morass of mud. But two or three groups of Germans were also trying to get to the metalled road from various directions. The route I marked out was harder, but safer. We had to cut across the highway and then turn north, coming out by way of second-class roads to Volokolamsk.

Filimonov was to set out immediately along this route. He left me to join his company at the double.

Sinchenko brought up Lysanka. Jumping into the saddle, I rode off to meet Boszhanov.

The strong artillery horses were dragging the guns through a shallow hollow. The fog had licked up the thin covering of snow. The wheels cut into the turf. Bracing their feet in the wet slippery grass, the men were helping the straining horses.

They glanced up at me sullenly. Someone cursed dismally. Someone else said:

"Ekh, Comrade Battalion Commander.... They're pushing along all the roads...."

Someone else grumbled under his breath:

"And what does he care? He'll whip up his horse, and good-bye to you...."

I recognized Pashko.

"Pashko! What did you say?"

"Nothing."

I should have called him to order, but I kept quiet. I couldn't understand what had happened to the men. After all, they had come back safe and sound from a dangerous and difficult mission, had carried out their task honourably. Why, then, instead of pride and satisfaction, this depression?

Boszhanov came up to me. Usually lively and smiling, he too was glum now. He began to report formally, but I interrupted him.

"What struck you out there? Why have you all gone so sour?"

Lowering his voice, Boszhanov said reluctantly:

"They found out...."

"What did they find out?"

"That everywhere round here our forces have withdrawn. And we're again...."

"Again what? What sort of nonsense is this?"

Looking me straight in the eye, Boszhanov replied reproachfully:

"*Aksakal*, why are you talking to me like that? After all you know, I—"

But I interrupted him again.

"Your 'I' is there!" I said pointing to the sullen men pushing the guns. "Think about them. You answer for the men. Well, 'we're again' what?"

"Again isolated. . . ."

"Where did you get that from?"

"All the outposts were withdrawn in front of our eyes. . . . Everyone's gone. Long ago, *aksakal*."

So that was it! I recalled what Sevryukov had said about the "soldiers' wireless telephone." What joy this "telephone" had brought them then, in the hour of success. How different it was now, when we were retreating. . . .

The guns and limbers moved slowly. Thoughtfully I stared at the men. Once more I noticed Pashko. With his eyes still fixed on the ground, he, like the others, was pushing a gun, his muscular body strained, his heels digging into the squelchy, thawing ground. His high boots were plastered with mud, but I could still see their fancy brown kid tops. I couldn't help asking Boszhanov:

"What are those boots he's got on?"

"He took them off a German in Novlyanskoye," Boszhanov answered. "Killed an officer and took them. . . ."

Yes, he was an uncommon lad, that Pashko. Daring, desperate, but. . . . He still lacked, one still did not feel in him, as I had noticed that night, the primary virtues of a soldier—obedience and discipline, which are inculcated by strict military training and become second nature.

It had been a mistake on my part not to have pulled him up a few minutes ago. It would have pulled up all the others. . . . I ought to have done it, so that all of them would feel the presence of a commander.

But I really hadn't the time now. I had to find out whether Boszhanov's information were true, ascertain the situation, take my bearings and decide what to do.

Thus I committed a mistake which is impermissible for a commander under any circumstances: I ignored a soldier's impertinence, thus breaking the rule of "never letting them get away with it," and failed to buck up the men by letting them hear a word of authority.

And, as a ghastly consequence, within a few minutes blood was shed which need not have been shed.

3

The gun-fire that had shortly before been one indistinguishable din had now become intermittent, but it was much more distinct. Either the guns had moved closer or the sound was louder because we were clear of the woods and there were no trees to interfere. On the other side the sound of machine-gun and rifle fire receded.

In front of us, as before, all was quiet and deserted: the slopes of the ravine with its uneven crest distinctly outlined against the grey sky and obstructing the view, and beyond that the woods.

It is hard to find oneself in the midst of fighting knowing nothing of what is going on, seeing nothing and having nothing to do. The battalion was protected by mounted patrols, but after Boszhanov's report I decided to have a look round from the nearest hill to see what was going on.

"Pull the guns into the woods," I said to Boszhanov. "I'm riding over to that hill to have a look round. . . ."

Sinchenko wanted to come with me, but I left him at the edge of the woods.

A minute later Lysanka had brought me to the top of a low hill. From there I could see a village that stretched along the highway. Every now and then my eye caught the white flashes of artillery fire. I raised my field-glasses.

Our artillery was withdrawing. The tractor-drawn guns were crawling out of the village and moving over the fields away from the highway. The gunners, looking restlessly to the left and right, were marching beside their guns. I recognized the lanky figure of Colonel Malinin, Commander of the Artillery Regiment. Through the field-glasses I saw him stop, pull out and open his cigarette case, take out a cigarette, strike a match and light up, all unhurriedly, with deliberately emphasized calmness. Then he stopped one of the crawling guns and pointed somewhere. The tractor drove off, but the gunners remained standing where they were. Moving my glasses in the direction to which Malinin had pointed, for the first time I saw German tanks—the white crosses on the blue-black armour, the flames darting from the slim barrels of their guns.... Firing as they went, the panzers were entering the village.

I wanted to follow this battle, to watch the film of modern warfare that was unreeling before my eyes, but I lowered my glasses and glanced around me. My patrols were galloping along the road that led to the highway. I guessed that they must have encountered the Germans who were pushing this way, while our units, which were retreating north, had most likely abandoned the road already.

In what way and over what roads would we get out now? It was necessary to move the battalion to the other side of the dirt road immediately, while the junction was still clear, so that we would not be cut off and hemmed in at the cross-roads. I continued to scan the terrain anxiously. And suddenly I caught sight of Filimonov's company, which had already started out at my orders.

Moving in column of route along the ravine, unable to see what was happening in the village, not seeing the tanks, the company was marching straight into the clutches of the Germans. What was the matter with him? Had he gone crazy? He was pushing ahead, devil take him, as if he were blind! Frantically I dug my spurs into Lysanka so that she reared with pain.

Galloping past the outskirts of the wood, and past the battalion, I dashed off after the company.

4

I caught up with them.

"Company, halt! Filimonov, where d'you think you're going?"

In blank astonishment he said:

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander?"

"Where are you going?"

"I thought, Comrade Battalion Commander, of going to the village through this hollow and then proceeding along the line of march."

"Why didn't you send out a patrol? The Germans are in the village!"

A dumbfounded expression spread over his reddish face. Yefim Yefimovich Filimonov later became one of the heroes of the battalion, but on that occasion his company, without any anti-tank equipment, had almost walked into the German tanks: he led his men along a deep hollow from which he could not see anything in any direction.

I had managed to get there in time to stop him and not a man was lost. But time had been lost.

Someone was coming down the hollow at a gallop. I recognized Sinchenko's grey mare.

"Comrade Battalion Commander!" he exclaimed on reaching us. "They are running...."

"Who?"

Without answering my question, panting and excited, he went on:

"They saw you ... shouted: 'The Battalion Commander's run away'... and took to their heels...."

"Who?"

"That lot.... Yesterday's.... Those you took in...."

"And the battalion?"

"I don't know.... The Germans are already on the road. That lot set up a shout: 'The Battalion Commander's run away,' and then scattered.... And I came right after you...."

"Filimonov," I said, "withdraw your company at the double! Sinchenko, follow me!"

And for the second time that day I dug my spurs into Lysanka.

5

I galloped off towards the woods. From the distance the place looked deserted. Could it really be so? Had panic actually set in? Could it be that my Damascus blade, my battalion, had been shattered in a twinkling? Then there was nothing to live for! But I did not believe it, did not believe it!

Dashing ahead, I noticed several men on the outskirts of the woods. They seemed to be waiting for me. I rushed up to them. There was the gloomy Krayev. I saw the line of unfinished trenches, the mounds of freshly dug earth. But I could not see the men there.

"Krayev! What's happened to the battalion? Where are the men?"

Saluting, he replied:

"Orders were received, Comrade Battalion Commander, to stand by to move."

"Well.... Where's your company?"

"They're back in the woods.... The company is in good order, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"But what happened here? Where—"

Krayev pointed to the spot where a few minutes earlier I had met the detachment returning with the guns.

"Over there," he muttered glumly.

Ekh, there was no getting anything out of him in a hurry! Off I went again on Lysanka.

On the way I caught a fleeting glimpse of the country road. Lorries and more lorries were moving down the road, followed by guns on caterpillar tracks. The Germans!

I sent Lysanka down the hill and into the ravine. Two more guns had to be dragged into the woods yet. Huddling in disorder around the sunken wheels and the horses were the men whom I had taken into the battalion yesterday, after the night massacre in Novlyanskoye. They were not dragging the guns or working. I saw Boszhanov, his face pale, his lips tight pressed, clutching a revolver in his hand.

"Boszhanov!" I shouted, "was it these who ran? Are these the men that shouted the Battalion Commander had run away?"

He nodded silently. His lips remained tight pressed and his familiar round face was unrecognizably stern, his cheeks drawn and all his features harsh.

"Here's your Battalion Commander!" I shouted. "Can you all see? Boszhanov, who shouted? All of them?"

"There they are. . . ."

With a jerk of his head Boszhanov indicated two corpses lying prone on the slope a little way off. Blood ran down into deep hoof marks. Guessing rather than recognizing, I saw that one of them was the man who might have become a famous hero. . . . Might have. . . . But who had perished as a traitor and a coward.

Yes, that was Pashko. The unnaturally drawn-up legs, which looked as if they had stopped in mid-air, were encased in high, brown kid boots plastered with mud.

Meanwhile Boszhanov had recovered sufficiently to report properly.

"Permit me to report, Comrade Battalion Commander. . . . As a result of the panic that started, I was obliged to resort to arms. . . ."

"And this mob? Did they run too? Why didn't you shoot every one who ran?"

Boszhanov was silent.

"I order you to open fire without warning if the cowards start running again!"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander."

No, I am not blood-thirsty. Senseless cruelty is repulsive to me. But the situation was so critical that the men had to be taught a lesson, so that they learned once and for all the law of war, the law of the army. I turned my glance on the crowd.

"Well, do you all see the Battalion Commander? Can all of you hear him? Boszhanov, smarten up your men! Drag out the guns! Then report to me at headquarters and get your defence sector."

I flicked the reins. My faithful horse had regained her breath, and trotted back to the H.Q. tent in the wood.

6

We were in an angle between two German columns. The battalion was cut off again.

If future critics of our story consider it necessary to place the blame for this on someone, I will simplify their task: it was I who was guilty! Without risk there can be no war! I had taken a risk, had sent a party of men behind the enemy lines for the shells and guns that had been abandoned there. The guns had been salvaged, but the battalion was stuck, the battalion was cut off. Now there was no getting out before dark.

Had I committed a mistake in carrying out this operation? Possibly. Shouldn't I have acted more wisely, with greater caution? Possibly.

If I deserve it, let no mercy be shown me for my mistakes, for I will not pretend to be faultless, the perfect commander.

We were caught in an angle between two German columns. Tanks were coming down the highway. Following them in two streams came lorries, motor cycles, tractors, infantry, artillery and ammunition carriers—the main spearhead of the German army on their way to Volokolamsk, to Moscow. And along the dirt-road, moving towards the highway, streamed the transport of the auxiliary group that had broken through near us the day before.

A traffic jam was developing at the cross-roads. German military police were regulating traffic, holding up first one, then another column.

I looked through my field-glasses. The faces of the German soldiers riding in the lorries were almost all very young, like those I had seen the day before in Novlyanskoye. I did not notice any great amount of laughter, merriment or excitement; they were in forage-caps and light coats, many of them were shivering and had thrust their hands into their sleeves. The cold damp of October was eating into them. This was an ordinary working day for them, the conquerors: they were used to it—forward . . . forward!

The artillery officer came over to me.

"Are the guns laid?" I asked.

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander!"

"Load and report!"

We have moved our eight guns to a salient jutting out from the woods towards the cross-roads. I sent some of the artillerymen to the six guns of Shilov's battalion, which were in position at another point. It was about a thousand yards from the woods to the cross-roads. We had a good view of the target. The German lorries were clearly visible through the gun-sights. That is what is called point-blank range.

"Ready!" came the report from the gun position.

"Battery fire. . . ."

The command was given:

"Battery. . . ."

A pause.

"Fire!"

The guns flashed and boomed. The ground shook. Through my field-glasses I saw bits of metal and splinters go flying into the air.

"Fire!"

Jumping down from their trucks the Germans made a rush for the roadside ditches, while the military police dropped out of sight immediately.

Fire!"

No, Herr Conquerors, you will not pass here! Cut us off, did you? No! We have closed the way to you with fire, have severed your columns. You were hurrying to Moscow. Wait a bit. Take the trouble to settle up with us first. Try and crush a battalion of the Red Army!

WILL THE RIFLES SAVE US!

1

All traffic on the road stopped. Vehicles following behind backed out of the jam, circled round the trucks of the next column that had been held up by the congestion, and returned to the village.

I left two guns in the salient in the woods with orders to pound the German trucks, shifting position when the enemy opened fire.

Quickly clearing a way through the woods with axe and saw, we moved the other guns to the fringe of the woods nearest the village.

The artillery observers climbed pine-trees, with field-glasses and telephones. From these observation posts they reported that the village was packed with motor vehicles and that they were being diverted to the dirt road, but that lorries were stuck in the mud there.

"Give them hell!" I said to the battery commander. "Send sixty rounds into that crowd. Then wait for orders. We'll repeat if they're still stirring."

Then I set off for headquarters. The companies had taken up circular defence positions in the woods. The men had dug into the ground. The patch of woods where we were entrenched was bigger than our woodland island of the day before, but I was not satisfied with this. I made a point of increasing the interval between the men so as to keep down losses as a result of German fire, which I was sure we should soon be getting. I had one machine-gun and three rifle platoons moved to various points deep in the woods as reserves, and ordered the men to dig foxholes for themselves. The dressing-station and all the wounded went underground into narrow, winding trenches. The headquarters platoon was digging a trench for the horses.

The battalion command post was no longer in a tent but underground in a dug-out, roofed over with several layers of logs. A lamp was burning there again; there was the familiar table; the signallers had fixed themselves up in a corner, and, as usual, Rakhimov got up to meet me as I came in.

I called up the positions where Shilov's guns were standing. These guns covered the country road. This road, too, was now blocked with wrecked machines.

I gave the order to fire fifty rounds at the nearest village on the road, where there was also a congestion in traffic. I felt that we had the enemy sewn up tight. Now he would show his fangs. Never mind, we'd see now how he would manage to swallow us; most likely we would stick in his throat like a bone.

I don't know whether you have ever experienced a feeling of perfect fitness, when you are fully prepared, when your head is absolutely clear and your body feels marvellously light. My guns were booming from various directions. We were attacking. We were leading the dance. Yesterday's depression, yesterday's apprehensions, seemed never to have existed.

2

One of the tactical principles of the *Blitzkrieg* applied by the Germans in Poland, in Holland, in Belgium, and in France, was, as you know, to break through the line of the front at various points, and to speed ahead, always going forward, leaving behind scattered, isolated, and demoralized enemy pockets. Around Moscow the Nazis did not succeed in doing this.

Take the case of my own battalion.

Finding ourselves cut off (I repeat, through my own fault) in the middle of our march, near the highway, the only paved road in this district over which the Germans could have sped ahead, we, in our turn, cut this road with artillery fire. In military language this is called controlling the road.

By doing this we forced the Germans to spend time in wiping out this pocket of resistance instead of pushing ahead. Forced them.... In military language this is called imposing your will on the enemy.

The Germans began to rake the woods with guns and mortars. We answered back, using our artillery. After drawing up all fourteen guns to one spot and firing several volleys into the rear of the enemy, we would quickly disperse them in groups of two and four, and shower the enemy with rapid fire at other points. From the tops of the trees we had a view of six villages. All six were occupied by the Germans. We pounded the enemy in all these points turn-and-turn about. Luckily we were well off for shells and guns.

Nine bombers came flying up. They dived over our positions. The blasts shook the woods. And with what result? Mother Earth sheltered us. The horses suffered most, as we had not managed to dig them in properly. Fourteen dead horses, two smashed guns and six wounded men were the result of the air raid.

Towards noon, guns began to boom again without ceasing, as they had done in the morning, far away in the distance, about ten miles to the north, that is, in the direction of Volokolamsk. From time to time the distant blasts merged in a single long-drawn-out roar. Judging by the sound, it was not a few batteries firing, but a hundred or a hundred and fifty guns, as in the morning. Subsequently we learned that the German tanks had been encountered there by another artillery regiment. Meanwhile, we were not letting reinforcements through along the road here, we were holding up the artillery, the motorized infantry, and ammunition.

Three times the German infantry launched attacks on us. Each time we let them come close and then cut them down with volleys of rifle and enfilading machine-gun fire, pinning to the ground those of them who were not killed and forcing them to crawl back. One attack was launched at the point where there were some of our guns that had just wheeled into position. This gave us the opportunity which every true artilleryman secretly awaits, the chance to meet the enemy infantry with canister. I don't know whether you know what it's like. On leaving the muzzle of the gun, the shell bursts in the air hurling forth hundreds of bullets, hundreds of piercing, red-hot fragments that fly right into the face of the attacking infantry with terrific force.

Three times that day we impressed on the enemy an elementary truth in warfare: that it is futile to push head-on into enfilading fire, futile to attack a position without crushing the firing points, without breaking the morale of the defenders.

And how much time, how much gun-fire, the Germans would have needed to crush us! Time—that was what we were taking away from the enemy, and simultaneously we were draining his manpower.

It was gradually getting darker. Time to think of withdrawing. But I had no desire to withdraw. If not for the fact that our ammunition was giving out, I would gladly have stayed in this place to fight another day, would have nailed the enemy down by his tail another day, playing with him....

Fear had vanished. The oppressive thoughts of yesterday had gone, left behind on yesterday's island in the woods.

This is how we got over the fear of being surrounded. This is how we went through our first course in higher military education.

3

It was already dark. Reconnaissance reported that there were German troops in all the neighbouring villages and that every village was protected by strong enemy outposts. No road was left to the battalion.

Still, as long as we were here, the highway did not belong to the enemy either. I had thought out a plan for getting out of encirclement. I would make my way through the forests. Just look at this map. Do you see that long narrow strip of forest that stretches away to the north, almost up to Volokolamsk? It would be easy enough for the infantry to march through the forest but what about wheeled traffic? Guns, carts? Abandon them?

While I was thinking this out I still continued fighting.

Under cover of darkness the Germans tried to resume traffic along the highway. We did not let them do so. They tried to detour. We stopped them, pounding the forks in the roads. I still felt that we had the enemy nailed down by the tail. I did not want to let him go.

Between nine and ten o'clock in the evening Lieutenant Anisyin, a messenger from Panfilov, arrived. He brought me a note from the General, ordering me to get out of the ring immediately and to take the battalion to Volokolamsk.

Anisyin had made his way to us through the woods. The distance between our battalion and our main forces was something like eighteen miles. How were we to negotiate this distance?

I decided to slip through into the dense forest under cover of darkness and to advance there by compass in a straight line on Volokolamsk, hewing a way for the artillery and the waggons. We gave a farewell concert to the Germans, treating all bases within reach of our guns to parting volleys. And now, good-bye for the present, *meine Herren*! We shall meet again.

The battalion began to pack up.

4

We marched and marched through the gloomy forest. It was a forest preserve, centuries old. Saws and axes got to work as we felled trees, dragged them aside, cutting a path, hewing a monument for ourselves.

There were seventy saws and about a hundred and fifty axes in the battalion, and we used all of them. We marched on and on. In the darkness the freshly-cut tree stumps gleamed a dull white. Our two-wheeled carts, ambulances, and guns moved along the road we had cut. We had twelve guns with us. The two that had been damaged we blew up. We had lost about twenty horses, but then the load was lighter: we had fired over a thousand shells at the enemy and carried with us only the minimum reserve of ammunition. Of the rifle cartridges, too, only a few boxes remained. The expended small arms ammunition—that was our volleys, our machine-gun fire and the three attacks we had beaten off. There was no bread, no canned meat, no grain or vegetables, except for the little we had kept for the wounded. Yes, it was indeed high time to withdraw. We would have had a hard time of it the next day.

We marched, sawed, hacked. We moved slowly: in places where trees had been brought down by storms, where the forest was denser, we made less than a thousand yards an hour. But we continued cutting our way through by compass, leaving behind us a monument which we had hewn, a monument that would last dozens of years.

We marched without a halt, without a rest, changing the working parties every hour.

Morning overtook us while we were still in the forest, still moving. The tall tree trunks whistled and sighed as they fell, smashing and crushing saplings and deadwood. Suddenly there was a halt. The saws fell silent. The rapping of the axes stopped short. A lone tree that was still falling described a swishing arc and crashed. Then silence.

The vanguard reported that the battalion had reached a glade which ran across our path. From there a dirt road led to the highway. The road was held by the enemy.

5

I stood on the outskirts of the forest, looking ahead.

Motor vehicles were crawling along, skidding and sticking in the mud. Those with seats intended for the infantry carried no soldiers, but in them the barrels of mortars were stacked up like firewood. The infantry were on foot, pushing and dragging out their vehicles. Some of the lorries were heavily loaded with ammunition, others had light guns in tow behind them. There must have been machine-guns and grenades somewhere along the sides of the lorries as well.

I stood there watching and thinking, five minutes, ten minutes. The trucks kept crawling past, sending up oblique showers of mud, helped on by the infantry that accompanied them. The mounted patrol I had sent out along the edge of the forest came back and reported that they could not see the end of the column. This was the stream of traffic that we had stemmed the day before in another place.

The glade ahead of us was about a thousand yards wide. We had to cross this open space and disappear behind the wall of the next stretch of woods.

What should I do? Deploy my guns? Get out my machine-guns? Give battle? But then I had almost no shells and very few cartridges. Should I wait for the night?

No; I could not do that either! The enemy had most likely ascertained already, or would soon ascertain, that we had left our yesterday's nest. Following our trail along the corridor we had hewn for ourselves, the enemy might discover us here at any moment, and the battalion had practically nothing with which to repulse enemy attacks. We could not return the enemy fire for long.

It was, of course, possible for us to withdraw into the depths of the forest and take cover there until dark. The Germans are not overfond of pushing into forests and prefer to avoid battles in the woods.

But I had my orders to bring the battalion to Volokolamsk. Panfilov wanted us there. We were needed to meet this horde with fire, needed urgently to bolster up our barrier, which was giving way under the pressure of the enemy.

I had to break through! Had to do so immediately while the Germans were still careless, before they knew that we were here.

How? By a sudden bayonet attack! Taken by surprise, the Germans would not put up any serious resistance at first. They were always at a loss when the menacing Russian "Hurrah" suddenly shattered the stillness. Hewing out a wide lane, we would take up positions on either side and hold the passage open until all our waggons, artillery, and wounded passed through. We had enough cartridges for covering fire. Then the covering companies would withdraw as well. Their withdrawal also had to be covered. With what? A pair of machine-guns. The most dangerous and hardest task would fall to the lot of the machine-gunners who would remain to the last, face to face with the attacking enemy. These men would have no one to cover their retreat. They would not get away. For this job, for this great feat, the truest and most loyal men were needed: men who would fire to their last cartridge, who would do their duty to the end, who would carry out the order not to retreat. It was hard.... Hard even for me to say to myself: "The last to remain will be Blokha's machine-gun crew." To remain for ever in this forest glade. And Boszhanov.... Yes, Boszhanov would be with the machine-gunners. Now I was sure that no one would waver at the machine-guns, that we would withdraw in good order, that we would be able to pick up and take away all who might be killed or wounded in the fighting. All, except.... Except the last heroic handful.

6

Silently the battalion moved towards the fringe of the forest.

"Pass the word down the column for company commanders to report to me," I ordered. "And Political Officer Boszhanov as well!"

How could I tell Boszhanov? How could I say to him: "Jalmukhamed, I am sacrificing you"?

As I waited for the commanders I continued to watch the slowly-moving, unending stream of German trucks. So far there was not a sign of alarm among them. No one there suspected that right there hidden in the forest some two or three hundred paces away, was a battalion of the Red Army.

And what if I were to do something quite different? What if.... No, that was a terrible risk that was not to be found in any manual, in any book of rules.

I glanced back at the men, who were standing stock-still among the trees, their eyes fixed on the Germans. Every one of them had a rifle, every one had a full issue of a hundred and twenty rounds in his belt. And what if I did dare? ... Would the rifles save us? Damn it all—we would perish, all of us, perhaps, if we were not successful in carrying out this risky step that had occurred to me. On the other hand, if we succeeded, we would all come out intact; no one would have to be left as a sacrifice in the maw of death. Why not try? Nothing venture, nothing have.

I looked at the men again. I felt that if I had asked any one of them: "Do you think we should abandon a few of our comrades to certain death in order to save the rest, or should we take the risk of either perishing to a man or coming out alive to a man?" Every one of them would have answered: "Let's risk it!"

"Well, my friends, very well! We shall not leave anybody behind!"

I felt instant relief and it surged through my whole being, my mind, my blood. Audacity returned.

One by one the company commanders came up to me.

I glanced at Boszhanov with particular affection. He caught my glance, stared in surprise, and rather hesitatingly smiled in answer.

7

To the commanders I explained the idea of the breakthrough. It was like this: the battalion would take up a diamond formation, one rank deep, with the waggons and guns inside the diamond. At the command the battalion would advance at a moderate pace, keeping its diamond formation. The men were to trail their rifles, prepared for action, and at the command, fire in volleys as they advanced. They were not to fire into the air or into the ground, but were to point their rifles directly at the enemy.

It was not easy to take up this formation in the forest. In front, at the sharp apex of the formation, I placed Rakhimov; at the two flank angles were Krayev and Filimonov; the point at the rear was held by Boszhanov. Boszhanov's detachment, my unforeseen reserve unit, covered the rear.

To these men whom we had taken into the battalion, I said:

"Comrades, I am placing you in the most responsible position. I trust you! If we come through, all faults will be forgotten."

They were issued additional grenades, including anti-tank grenades, which, after the formation had broken through, they were to hurl into the column of German trucks.

From the rear point I moved forward to the van, past the waggons and guns. I stopped beside Rakhimov and looked round. In a low voice I gave the command:

"Battalion—quick . . . march!"

The battalion moved forward, a bristling diamond.

The Germans did not realize immediately who and what we were, who were those strange silent ranks moving out of the forest. Many of them continued pushing their trucks; others turned and stared at us in astonishment. It really was something they could not understand. Red Army men not charging with their bayonets, not shouting "Hurrah." This was no attack. Were they coming to surrender? Hardly! They must have gone mad.

They let us advance about eighty or a hundred yards without raising an alarm. Then we heard an authoritative shout in German. I just managed to catch sight of some of them running to the trucks for their weapons, for the machine-guns. I actually mean "managed to catch," for time now seemed to be split up into the tiniest fractions.

"Battalion. . . ."

A moment of silence. The rifles did not move. I had ordered the men to fire as they marched, with their rifle-butts pressed against their ammunition pouches.

"Fire!"

A volley broke the silence.

"Fire!"

An awe-inspiring crash sent hundreds of bullets out fan-wise from the column.

"Fire!"

We marched and fired. It is a terrible thing—volley fire from a battalion, a single shot from seven hundred rifles at once, repeated at regular intervals. We kept the Germans pinned to the ground, gave them no chance to raise their heads or even to stir.

We marched and fired, clearing a path in front of us. Not a single soldier broke the ranks, not a man wavered. I led the battalion into a gap between the trucks. On the road, in the mud, lay dead Germans. Giving the order, I led the battalion straight ahead. A dead German sank into the mud under my feet.

Over the dead bodies, through the German column, passed men, horses, and wheeled transport.

The battalion had crossed the road. There were several sharp explosions: those were our grenades. Meanwhile we marched on, still firing volleys. During a moment of silence I shouted:

"Battalion! Obey the orders of Lieutenant Rakhimov!"

Now Rakhimov gave the orders to fire. Turning round, the men fired. We still did not let the Germans raise their heads or move.

I made my way through the diamond formation, past the guns and waggons, to the rear point and marched beside Boszhanov. Only two hundred to two hundred and fifty paces still separated us from the wall of the forest. We had still not allowed a single German to use his weapons against us.

Suddenly, in the distance behind us, several tanks appeared. They came on with a constantly mounting clamour, firing from machine-guns as they advanced. At the top of my voice I ordered:

"Battalion! Double march! Horses at the gallop! Into the forest!"

They dashed away. Only the handful of men from Shilov's battalion, the rear angle of the diamond, continued to march, their eyes fixed on Boszhanov and me. Despite the tenseness of the moment I smiled. Damn it all, they had certainly been cured of the habit of running. I shouted to them:

"What are you waiting for? A special order? Follow me at the double!"

We also dashed off. Behind us came the rattle and roar of the tanks, the rat-a-tat of machine-guns.

Men, waggons, and guns were disappearing into the forest. Some twenty or thirty paces from the forest I fell down. I did it intentionally; I had to look round to see whether there were any wounded, whether anybody had been left behind defenceless and without help; if even one man had been left behind we would have to hold the enemy back somehow and get him out. But nobody had been left. Two soldiers, bent over double, were running and carrying somebody.

I looked around. Boszhanov and some five other men had dropped beside me, among them Polzunov, who took cover behind a stump. He was pale, his neck was craned and his quick, clear eyes were swiftly taking in the surrounding terrain as he held a heavy anti-tank grenade in his hand, ready to throw. The face with the full young lips that I remembered so well from the morning when he had talked to Panfilov looked quite different; it was tense and determined now.

"Polzunov!" I shouted. "When I see the General again, he'll hear about you!"

He did not even smile.

"Now then," I commanded, "get going! Follow me!"

We jumped up and made a dash for the forest. One of the tanks sent a stream of tracer-bullets towards us. One of them hissed uncomfortably near my foot.

Once in the forest our guns turned round and opened fire. The time had come to use the "emergency ration" of shells. I turned round as I ran. One of the tanks was spinning around like a top, its track smashed. The others halted. You can't very well make for a gun sheltered behind century-old pines that can stand up to any caterpillar tracks. We dashed on into the forest. The tanks, continuing to fire, backed away.

8

In the course of this story I have several times spoken about volley fire.

I have stressed this intentionally. I wanted to emphasize one or two ideas in this true story, put them in italics or bold type, as it were.

It is, of course, a crude method to adopt. Much nicer to leave it to the critic, who would dot all the i's, compare one thing with another and make everything clear.

But in this case we are not speaking of love, which everyone has experienced, which everyone understands. We are dealing here with the technique of warfare, with questions of the art of warfare, with military matters. That is why I want to explain it all myself.

Our experience during the war had taught us commanders that in modern warfare, both in defence and attack, the most effective means of operating against enemy manpower and enemy morale is fire power! In addition, the surest results are to be had from unexpected fire. This stuns the enemy and immediately paralyzes the higher brain centres.

I call myself a pupil of Panifilov's and I try to be worthy of this honour. And Panfilov, as you know, persistently instilled in us: "We must take care of the soldier! We have to take care of him not in words, but by action, with fire!"

Yes, we must take care of the infantry by the use of fire and movement, by clearing and paving a road with fire, fire, and again-fire!

I have in mind not only artillery fire. "Put your trust in the artillery but keep awake yourself! The artillery will not fire from rifles instead of you, will not lead your company, instead of you, nor your battalion." These are also the words Panfilov said one day when we were analyzing a tactical exercise. Yes, the infantry possesses a powerful weapon of its own, the rifle volley: if it is properly used, especially in mobile warfare, the rifle volley is certain to paralyze the enemy psychologically. I repeat: the great power of the rifle volley is in its suddenness. This sudden action, apart from the choice of the correct moment, is based on discipline, again and again, discipline.

These are the thoughts that I would like to emphasize in bold type: move the infantry under cover of fire, and not only artillery fire but also its own fire—rifle volleys, not by shouting.

WITH PANFILOV IN VOLOKOLAMSK

1

Again we marched through the woods, cutting, hacking and hewing a way for ourselves. Volokolamsk was not far away. We could hear the gun-fire quite clearly.

At last we came to the edge of the woods. From there the church belfries were visible in the distance. A little way off and closer to us we could see the red brick buildings of the Volokolamsk Station, which is a mile or two outside the town. Fighting was raging there, at the station.

Suddenly I saw squat iron towers—huge oil tanks—rise slowly into the air, hang there for a moment as if suspended, and then come heavily down, flying to pieces. Smoke and flame shot up, and the next minute the rolling blast of the explosion reached our ears. The station was still in our hands, but our troops were already blowing up the tracks, warehouses and oil tanks so as not to leave the enemy a drop of fuel or a morsel of food.

I led the battalion towards the town. The outposts hailed us. They were from our regiment. I found out from them that Regimental Headquarters was in the north-east end of the town.

We marched over cobble-stones up to the town, after which began the asphalt road that led all the way to Moscow—the Volokolamsk Highway, towards which the Germans were pushing.

When we were about a hundred paces from the first houses I halted the battalion for a brief rest, long enough for a smoke.

Ten minutes later, in column of platoons, with all our guns, carts and waggons we moved on into the town. I marched at the head of the column, leaving Lysanka with my batman.

2

I remember the impression Volokolamsk made on me at that time. Several of the houses, mainly in the centre, had been wrecked by bombs. Evidently the enemy aircraft had made a number of raids on the town. A heavy bomb had damaged the wooden flour-mill. One corner had been blown away and the jagged ends of the rafters jutted through the gap. The roof had fallen in, the doors and window-frames had been blown out. Scattered by the blast, the damp flour lay in a thin film over the slopes of a roadside ditch, untouched by feet or wheels. In the middle of the street glass crunched underfoot.

Flour from the wrecked mill was being distributed to the population. There were queues of a sort and some semblance of order, but the flour was no longer being weighed out. It was being distributed in a hurry, shovelled up by the pailful and poured into outstretched sacks and pillow-cases.

Meanwhile we marched through the streets keeping our dressing, in column of fours.

Everybody seemed to be hurrying somewhere, bustling about and rushing to and fro. It looked as if none of the inhabitants could walk calmly any longer. Farther on, we again passed a bomb-gutted wooden house, again saw sagging beams with the fresh yellow scars where they had been splintered, again marched over crunching glass. Amidst the ruins on the edge of the pavement lay a dead woman. A breeze stirred her dishevelled grey hair. But one lock of hair was glued to her head by fresh blood, still red and not yet congealed. There was a little pool of blood on the ground near her head. Apparently someone had carried the body away from the road, but now there was no one beside the corpse.

In one brick building with great black gaps where the window-frames had been blown out, a signboard had also been wrenched loose so that it was now hanging on a single hinge; but no one bothered to put such things to rights any longer.

A patrol passed down the street. At the cross-roads stood a Red Army man, regulating traffic, his rifle slung, wearing a red arm-band. He stood to attention and saluted us. There was military order in the city, but the former, customary civilian order no longer existed.

Pedestrians were hurrying by, rushing to and fro, exchanging hasty words. Some were moving their belongings for some reason or other, and everyone was hurrying, hurrying, hurrying.

I remember thinking that passengers on a ship driven by a storm on to some uncharted rock must act in just this way. They are in the grip of fear: at any moment the ship may burst asunder and go to the bottom.

As yet not in enemy hands, not abandoned by us, the town seemed as though it had already been taken—captured by fear.

A boy of sixteen or seventeen was standing in a gateway. For a second our glances met. He stared at me hard, frowning. His youthful face was serious, his head slightly thrust forward. In this pose, in his glance, there were stubbornness and reproach. After I had gone on a hundred yards or so, I glanced back at the ranks of the battalion and once more saw the youngster at the gate. He was standing there motionless, just as if he had nothing to do with the hustling and bustling around him.

Subsequently, when we learned about the fight put up by the Volokolamsk partisans against the invaders, about the eight who were hanged in Volokolamsk, I remembered this lad. I had a feeling that he must have been among those who fought. He was not the only one in the city; but at that time, on that cheerless October day, all we saw in the streets was this commotion.

Meanwhile we marched on and on, staring about us gloomily.

People looked at us too. Along the streets of a doomed town where the smoke of the fires at the station could already be smelt, an army unit was passing in formation, maintaining the regulation intervals, commanders at the head of the companies, with guns, machine-guns and waggons. A battalion in column, as you know, is a thousand yards long.

We were not marching as if we were on parade. The men were tired, grim, no holiday lay ahead of us, no fun, only battles even bitterer than those we had already fought; but under the eyes of the townspeople we squared our shoulders, kept our dressing and our step.

But they did not look at us with pride and admiration. Retreating troops are not admired, retreating armies do not command respect. The women looked at us pityingly. Some wiped away tears. Most likely many of them thought that our forces were already abandoning the city. The sad, terrified eyes seemed to be asking: "Can everything really be over; has everything for which we laboured, about which we dreamed, actually perished?"

Hard indeed was that march through the town. But in answer to the glances of the townspeople, in answer to the tumult and hubbub, to the fear that gripped the city, we raised our heads proudly, squared our shoulders and stepped out more firmly and resolutely than ever. With every one of our footsteps, the hundreds of feet sounding like one, we replied:

"No, this is not catastrophe, this is war."

To fear and sorrow we answered: "No, we are not some sorry mob that has broken out of encirclement and that has been smashed by the enemy. We are organized Soviet forces, who have tried our strength in battle. We had thrashed the Nazis, we had put fear into them, we had marched over their bodies. Just look at us as we march in front of you in formation, heads high, a proud military unit, part of the mighty and formidable Red Army!"

3

The battalion was nearing the north-east end of the town, where the regiment had its headquarters.

At one street crossing, I think it was where the traffic-control man was standing, the cobble-stones changed to asphalt: that is the point where the Volokolamsk Highway begins and from there it goes straight to Moscow, smooth asphalt all the way.

Suddenly, as we were passing a house—I still remember its neat blue shutters—a window was flung wide open and Regimental Commissar Pyotr Logvinenko leaned out, waving his hand to us joyfully. Meanwhile Regimental Chief-of-Staff Sorokin, a grey-haired major, was already running down the steps of the porch to meet us. As he gripped my hand, his elderly, experienced eyes shone with emotion. Logvinenko had now rushed downstairs, and throwing his arms around me, he pulled me aside and kissed me.

But as for me, I was bewildered. Why were we being welcomed like this? On the way I had been thinking that, on the contrary, I would be reprimanded for my delay. Only at this point did I realize how worried and upset our comrades had been over the fate of the battalion that had been cut off by the Germans and from which nothing had been heard for so long. Most likely they had often thought secretly that we had been destroyed, and had thought of us now and then with a regretful word of farewell.

Major Yelin, reserved and reticent as ever, was standing on the porch in silence, watching the ranks go by. I walked over to him to report. After hearing my report, he said briefly:

"Good. You'll give me a more detailed report later. Meanwhile have the battalion billeted in the houses. Let the men rest. The Regiment is in the Divisional Commander's reserve." A note of pride had crept into his even voice with his last words. He was unable to hide it. A young officer in the First World War, later a commander in the Red Army, he was proud of the army to which he had the honour to belong.

I wonder if you realize the significance of the simple sentence: "The Regiment is in the Divisional Commander's reserve," at that time, after all we had gone through.

It meant that after the break-through by the Germans, after two or three critical days and nights, the Division was again standing in front of the enemy, formed up for defence, with strong reserves somewhat in the rear. This simple sentence implied that the front was again closed in the face of the Nazis who had broken through, that the barrier was up again in front of Moscow as before.

The battalion marched on and on. The guns moved ahead. Suddenly a young, fresh-complexioned lieutenant, Panfilov's aide, came up to me. Saluting, he said:

"Comrade Momysh-Uly, the General wants you."

"Where is he?"

"Come with me. In this house. The General, you know, looked out of the window and wondered what troops these were and where they came from." And he burst out laughing.

Calling over Rakhimov, I gave orders for the men to be billeted and then went off with the aide.

4

I crossed the outer room, where the signallers sat with their telephones and where Staff officers were on duty, to Panfilov's room. Briskly he rose to his feet behind a table on which there were also telephones and a map that covered the whole top.

I stood to attention and was about to report, but Panfilov did not give me a chance. Quickly walking over to me, he took my hand and gripped it in both his, in the manner customary among my people, the Kazakhs.

"Sit down, Comrade Momysh-Uly. Sit down.... Would you like some tea? You won't refuse a bit of something to give you strength?"

Without waiting for an answer he opened the door and called out:

"Bring us some dinner, a snack, the samovar.... And everything else that goes with it!"

Then he turned to me and his smile, his little eyes, with their slightly Mongolian slant, had a look of tenderness.

"Sit down. Tell me all about it. Did you lose many men?"

I reported my losses.

"Did you bring away the wounded?"

"Yes, Comrade General."

"Did you give orders to have the men fed and billeted?"

"Yes, Comrade General."

Walking over to the telephone, Panfilov called up the Divisional Chief-of-Staff and told him to report immediately to Rokossovsky, at Army Headquarters, that a full-strength battalion which had broken its way through the enemy lines had arrived in Volokolamsk.

After listening to some report from the other end of the wire, he bent over the map and began to ask questions. I heard some of them:

"And to the north? Quiet? When did you get your last report from there? And after that? You know, I don't trust that quiet. Make enquiries again, find out the details.... And please don't forget to send Captain Gofman to me with all the reports."

Putting down the receiver, Panfilov continued to examine the map for some time. His face was serious, even gloomy. He snorted several times. Mechanically reaching for his cigarette case he took out a cigarette, tapped one end on the table and then remembering, glanced up at me.

"Excuse me...." He quickly held out the open cigarette case.

"Now then, Comrade Momysh-Uly, tell me all about it. Tell me about everything," he said.

5

I had decided to make my report as brief as possible in order not to take up too much of the General's time. I felt that at the present moment, in the tense atmosphere of battle, he would naturally be concerned with more urgent matters than me and my report.

"On October twenty-third ..." I began.

"Now, now, where do you think you're beginning," interrupted Panfilov. "Hold on a bit with the twenty-third of October. First tell me about the fighting on the roads. Do you remember our 'spiral,' the spring? Now then, how did it work with you?"

Those minor skirmishes, those small-scale operations by a platoon under Donskikh and a platoon under Brudny—had receded far into the background after the events that followed them. Strange that Panfilov should ask me about them. What possible significance could these first skirmishes of ours have now?

Panfilov smiled as if he guessed my thoughts.

"My troops," he said, "are my academy.... That applies to you too, Comrade Momysh-Uly. Your battalion is your academy. Now then, what did you learn?"

These words suddenly gave me a warm feeling. However hard I tried to steel myself, still the picture of the town gripped by fear had a depressing effect on me. And here was Panfilov, in this town, in a room in which the sound of artillery fire was distinctly audible, asking with a smile: "Now then, what did you learn?" And suddenly his calm confidence was transmitted to me.

Leaning towards me, Panfilov was waiting with keen interest to hear my answer.

That was a question! What had I learned? Well, then, come what may, I would tell him what was most important.

"Comrade General," I said, "I realized that the modern warfare is a psychological war."

"How did you put it? A psychological war?"

"Yes, Comrade General. Just as there are psychological attacks, so here the whole war is a psychological war...."

"Psychological...?" drawled Panfilov in an enquiring tone.

In his usual way he fell silent, lost in thought. I waited on tenterhooks for what he would say, but at that moment the door opened. Someone asked:

"May I come in?"

"Yes, yes, come in."

Captain Gofman, Chief of the Operations Section of Divisional Headquarters, came in quickly, with a big black folder under his arm.

"You sent for me...."

"Yes, yes.... Sit down."

I rose to go.

"Where are you going, Comrade Momysh-Uly?" asked Panfilov. Then he added jokingly, "You want to close the book in the most interesting place, eh? That will never do...."

I wonder if he realized that these words would actually go down in a book.

"Have a bite meanwhile." He pointed invitingly to the table where dinner had already been waiting for me for some time.

6

I did not like the idea of listening to the low conversation but I could not help hearing snatches of it.

It seemed that Panfilov did not trust the reassuring reports from a certain sector, until now comparatively quiet, at some distance from the direction of the German's main drive, and he was demanding the most exhaustive, rigid, and scrupulous verification.

Then I caught:

"Do you understand me?"

That was how our General usually showed that the conversation was at an end. I had heard him say those few words many times. It was not just an empty formula with him, or a habit. He did not just say it, but actually asked, always looking at the person whom he was addressing.

The captain saluted and was about to leave, but Panfilov addressed him again. I heard a question to which at the time I attached no importance. I realized its significance only later.

"Is the representative from the Far Eastern troops on his way here?" he asked.

"Yes, Comrade General, he'll soon be here."

"Good. Please send him to me immediately."

With a nod he dismissed the captain. Then he turned to me.

"Why don't you eat, Comrade Momysh-Uly? Eat!"

Getting up, I thanked him.

"Please don't get up. Sit down."

The old-fashioned, fat-bellied samovar which had been brought in was humming softly. Panfilov poured glasses of hot strong tea for himself and for me, sat down, sniffed at the steam rising from the glass, clicked his tongue softly and smiled.

"Now then, Comrade Momysh-Uly," he said, "let's have it all in order. How did the plan that we traced on the map together work? How did the platoons operate on the roads?"

I began to report. Sipping his tea slowly, Panfilov listened attentively. From time to time he put in a remark, for the time being incidental, not touching on what was most important. Thus, for instance, he asked about Donskikh:

"Did you write to his people?"

"No, Comrade General."

"Pity. You did wrong, Comrade Momysh-Uly, not like a soldier. And it's not kind of you. I want you to write, please. And write a letter to the Young Communist League Committee in his home town."

With regard to Lieutenant Brudny, Panfilov gave orders to return him to his former post.

"He's earned it," he said. "And in general, Comrade Momysh-Uly, except in case of extreme necessity, you should not shift people around. A soldier gets used to his commander as he does to his rifle.... But go on, go on."

I told him about the twenty-third of October, how the battalion came to be surrounded.

Pushing away his glass, he listened to me, bending forward slightly, his eyes fixed on me, as though he were finding something more in my words than I put into them.

My report made clear to Panfilov some details of the battle which was still going on and which had reached a new stage. It was probably only then that he discovered why two days earlier—in the midst of the fierce battle he was directing—he had suddenly felt that the pressure of the enemy had relaxed, that it had suddenly become easier to breathe. At that particular time, far from Volokolamsk, far from our main forces, our guns had gone into action, our battalion, cut off at the cross-roads, was fighting. The enemy columns had been cut, the main road blocked, and for some time the Germans had nothing with which to develop their offensive, nothing with which to support their forces.

It had seemed a lucky turn of battle, but today's lucky turn Panfilov would apply on the morrow as a well-thought-out, deliberate tactical move. I was convinced of this several days later, when under new circumstances Panfilov set me a mission. Yes, his troops were his academy.

7

Once again experiencing the thrill of the battle, I described how we had cut a road for ourselves with volley fire right through the German column, and how we had crossed over their dead bodies. I was secretly proud of the victory in the woodland glade. There, in that short encounter, I felt for the first time that I was beginning to command not only the rudiments but also the art of warfare.

"You talk," said Panfilov with a smile, "as if volley fire were your own invention. As a matter of fact, Comrade Momysh-Uly, we fired like that back in the tsarist army. We fired volleys by companies, at the order."

After a moment's thought he went on:

"But I don't mean to offend you, Comrade Momysh-Uly. Good, very good, I'm glad you're interested in this. And keep it up in your future operations too. Accustom your men to it."

He fell silent, looking at me affectionately and waiting for me to say something.

"That's all I have to say, Comrade General."

Panfilov got up and began to pace the room.

"A psychological war ..." he said as though thinking aloud. "No, Comrade Momysh-Uly, that word doesn't quite cover it, doesn't take in the present war. Our war is broader. But if you have in mind such things as tanko-phobia, tommy-gun-phobia, encirclement-phobia, and so on" (Panfilov used just these strange words of his own invention which I heard then for the first time), "then undoubtedly you are right."

Walking over to the table where the map lay, he called me over.

"Come here, please, Comrade Momysh-Uly."

Then he told me something of the situation at the front. The enemy was pressing on Volokolamsk from the north and from the south, had penetrated east of Volokolamsk to the expanse between the two highways and was hovering there in the rear of the Division, but had as yet been unable to get to the Volokolamsk Highway at a single point.

"My line's thin, here, and in this place it's dangerous," said Panfilov pointing to the map. "However, I am sitting here and keeping H.Q. here, Comrade Momysh-Uly. I really ought to move the Staff away a little, but then the Regimental Headquarters would also move off the least bit. After that the Battalion Commanders, too, would look for a more convenient place of residence. And it would all be quite legitimate, quite in accordance with the rules. But in the trenches the whisper would pass: 'H.Q. is withdrawing.' And the soldier would have lost his composure and his moral courage."

Once again Panfilov smiled his charming, clever smile.

"A psychological war. . . ." Panfilov snorted, still smiling. Apparently in spite of everything this expression appealed to him. "Yes, we could have held the Germans here, on this sector" (Panfilov pointed to the sector in front of Volokolamsk that we had abandoned), "for something like a month, but there were some people whom they hoodwinked and here and there they get away with it. Still, if we count from the fifteenth we've been holding them here for almost two weeks. So you see, Comrade Momysh-Uly, the victors can prove the losers."

"How's that, Comrade General?"

"And the price?" retorted Panfilov briskly. "What about the price that's paid for victory?"

After mentioning the approximate number of enemy casualties during the whole period of the battles around Volokolamsk (about 15,000 killed and wounded), Panfilov said that although this figure was not big in itself, it was a very telling blow to the German group that was pushing towards the Volokolamsk Highway.

"But still more important for us at present is time," Panfilov added.

Turning away, he listened for a while to the muffled rumble of the guns. Then, glancing at me again, he suddenly winked.

"They've got plenty of thunder," he said, "but where's their lightning? Where, Momysh-Uly? Our army robbed Hitler of it, quashed it, our army did that, including you and me. We've won—and are still winning—time, Comrade Momysh-Uly."

After a brief pause, he repeated:

"Yes, and the victors may prove the losers.... Do you understand me, Comrade Momysh-Uly?"

"Yes, Comrade General."

Our conversation was coming to an end. Panfilov asked me a few parting questions.

"And what about the soldier? What do you think the soldier got out of the fighting? Do you think he has come to understand what we have called psychological warfare? Has he got to know the Germans?"

I suddenly remembered Polzunov.

"Pardon me, Comrade General, I forgot to report to you about Polzunov."

Remembering, Panfilov raised his eyebrows.

"Ah! Well, well..." he said urging me on.

8

The door opened again and the aide came in.

"Comrade General, Lieutenant-Colonel Vitevsky to see you. From Headquarters of the newly-arrived Division."

Panfilov quickly glanced at his watch.

"Good, very good."

Then he automatically ran his fingers through his hair, touched his black, clipped moustache and squared his round shoulders the least bit. Obviously an important meeting was ahead of him. Glancing at me, however, he said to the aide:

"Please ask the Lieutenant-Colonel to wait a little while."

He did not want to cut short the conversation with me. Our General was able to devote time without stint to a battalion commander.

"Well, well.... What about Polzunov," he said.

I told him what Polzunov had been like when he had come out of the woods with the men I had dubbed the "runaways," told him what he had been like in the last skirmish, how alert, clear and intelligent his eyes had been when he had looked around him with the anti-tank grenade in his hand.

"Give him my regards!" said Panfilov. "Don't forget. Every soldier likes an encouraging word for honest service, Comrade Momysh-Uly." Still not dismissing me, he held out his hand and gripped mine again warmly and affectionately in both his, Kazakh fashion.

"I would like you to let me have a list of men who have distinguished themselves for decorations. Only please see to it that I have the list today.... Well, you may go now.... I think I can let your battalion rest until tomorrow. Good luck to you." Quickly walking past me, he opened the door.

"Come in, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel."

The Lieutenant-Colonel came into the room.

I was about to walk out when Panfilov took me by the arm. Glancing at the officer who had just come in, he leaned over and whispered in my ear:

"That's our reinforcements, Comrade Momysh-Uly. From the Far East. Twelve days on the road. Speeding here. Got here on time. Now you see the significance of the defensive battle at Volokolamsk, Comrade Momysh-Uly. Time—we gained time!"

The moisture of excitement, the moisture of happiness covered his eyes for a moment.

As I closed the door behind me I saw the General again. Panfilov had placed his pocket watch, with the strap hanging loose, on the table. Short of stature, somewhat round-shouldered, with a sun-burned, wrinkled neck, he was standing with his back to the door and with a gesture inviting the lieutenant-colonel to take a seat. With his other hand, or rather with the thumb of his other hand, he was mechanically polishing the glass of his watch.

There was heavy rain, and the sky was overcast. At the railway station the guns were booming. A faint smell of burning was in the air. The whole countryside was hidden under a mantle of darkness.

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АЛЕКСАНДР БЕК

ВОЛОКОЛАМСКОЕ ШОССЕ

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